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Shared Skin: H.D.'s Palimpsestic Autobiographical Fiction

by

Theresa L. Cowan

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of
the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Shared Skin: H.D.'s Autobiographical Fiction" submitted by Theresa L. Cowan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Prof. Jo-Ann Wallace

Prof. Julie Rak

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Sept. 8, 2003

Date

Abstract

In this thesis I read four of H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) auto/biographical novels (*HERmione*, *Asphodel*, *Nights*, and *Palimpsest*) as examples of palimpsestic autobiography. I argue that by writing her auto/biographical bodies palimpsestically and thereby superimposing bodies onto bodies, H.D. creates the effect that her bodies share a corporeal surface, they *share skin*: they are not many, but one. By integrating structural and post-structuralist linguistic theory (Saussure, Derrida), theories of writing and materiality (de Certeau, Hayles), and Gertrude Stein's theory of repetition, I have illustrated that H.D.'s disruptive, repetitive prose style works to expose how the conventions of written language, syntax, and narrative structure serve to keep bodies/selves separate. This exposure – the making apparent of bodies in language – denaturalizes the separateness of bodies, of skin, and insists that the reader acknowledge their own investment in difference, in distinction, in skin.

Dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Jim Cowan Jr.
1941-2003

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Introduction

Love the Skin You're In?

> "I went almost too far, I almost got out of my body."
> He said, "you did get out of your body."
>
> -- H.D. *Nights* 66

Throughout the research for this thesis I have returned (compulsively, it sometimes seemed) to the above passage from H.D.'s *Nights*. I was struck by the idea of getting out of the body, which led me to consider, in a more comprehensive way, the presences and absences of bodies[1] in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. What I find to be radical about bodies in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction is that they exemplify a tension between what Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, calls "inscription and incorporation" (198). That is, Natalia Saunderson's body (from *Nights*), for example, is not only an "inscription that functions as if it were independent of any particular instantiation" (Hayles 199), but, because "Natalia [. . .] is, of course, H.D. herself—multifaceted, every nerve exposed" (Shaffner xi), her body stands in, as a kind of incorporation, for H.D.'s body. What is so radical about that? Natalia's body (to use the example from *Nights*) is autobiographical *and* fictional and, as such, her body is not only an imaginary, discursive abstraction, but exists in the "constant interplay" (Hayles 199) between "incorporating practices [. . .] [and] inscriptions that abstract the practices into signs" (Hayles 199). What happens to

Natalia's fictional body necessarily has some impact on an understanding of the autobiographical subject, H.D.

It is important to note, however, as Hayles points out, that "the body is a congealed metaphor, a physical structure whose constraints and possibilities have been formed by an evolutionary history" (284). When I argue that Natalia's body "stands in for" H.D.'s body, I am referring to Natalia's body as standing in for the "congealed metaphor" of H.D.'s body. The interplay between inscription and incorporation, then, allows us to account for the multiple ways in which bodies exist in H.D.'s autobiographcial fiction. As there is necessarily always something abstract *and* material about H.D.'s autobiographical bodies, it makes what she does with bodies rather remarkable. The question I always come back to, after considering how Natalia "got out of" her body is: what impact does her "getting out of" have on our understanding of material bodies?

> Fayne being me, I was her. Fayne being
> Her I was Fayne. Fayne being Her
> was HER so that Her saw Fayne
>
> -- H.D. *HER* 210

The answer to my question has come to me through another of H.D.'s autobiographical novels, *HERmione.*[2] Like Natalia, Her (the H.D. figure in *HER*) also transgresses corporeal form and boundaries, but in a way that is less conspicuous than the outright claim that she "got out of" her body. Throughout *HER,* H.D. merges subject/object relations by performing a syntactical fox trot: "I

know her. Her. I am Her. She is Her. Knowing her, I know Her" (158). As S. Travis notes, following Susan Stanford Friedman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, the "syntactical disruption" which occurs in the "recurring phrase, 'I am Her'" creates a "proliferation of meanings" and, most importantly, in "I am Her," the "subject and object refuse to split " (126). More importantly, perhaps, for my purposes, [t]his proliferation which disrupts syntax is furthered by the introduction of Hermione's friend and lover, Fayne Rabb, after which 'I am her' can also mean 'I am her' in identification with another. When Hermione speaks the phrase, 'knowing her, I know Her' (*HER* 158) the number of possible readings proliferates accordingly, increasing the reader's and perhaps Hermione's sense of *dislocation*" (Travis 126 emphasis mine). "Her" is Her. "Her" is also Fayne. "Her," "She," and "I" are necessarily, then, both Fayne and Her, and as such, their bodies become indistinguishable from each/other. Like Natalia, who "got out of" her body in *Nights*, Her and Fayne are written "out of" their individual bodies, and into, or onto, a collective body: "I am her".

As Travis has noted (above), the sense of dis*location* is central to the ways in which bodies are written (inscribed) in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction, since bodies, as a physical manifestation/metaphor/imaginary apparatus for human subjects/objects, must be understood to be *located* (incorporated) somewhere. When we are reading, the image of bodies allows us to localize, identify, and differentiate between discrete characters. We imagine bodies in order to keep *one*

separate from the *other*. Bodies take up space, and as Jean Luc Nancy reminds us, "[t]wo bodies cannot occupy the same space simultaneously" (18). H.D., however, makes bodies (her body, the bodies of others) *share* space, or location: she *dislocates* bodies, writing multiple bodies onto the same space. In this way, the style and content of H.D.'s autobiographical fiction insists upon the liminality of bodies, upon a porous boundary between beings, upon skin that is at once one's and another's.

Palimpsest as Shared Skin

> **skin**, *n.* **II. 5. a.** The continuous flexible integument forming the usual external covering of an animal body; also, one or other of the separate layers of which this is composed, the derma or epidermis.
>
> -- *OED Online.*

> The chalked skinne for a palimpsestus, serving in stead of a table book.
>
> -- "Palimpsest, *n.*" *OED Online*
> **1661** LOVELL *Hist. Anim. & Min.* 7

I just stated that it is the "style and content" of H.D.'s writing that creates the effect of shared skin, but style and content how? And why does it matter?

First let me deal with my understanding of skin. The surface of the body is what differentiates us from others, it contains us, marks us as discrete from; skin is the threshold where "I" start and "you" end. As an incorporating practice we use skin to define a/the space of individual location, awareness, and subjectivity. Skin allows us to make a distinction between "self" and "other." Skin insists that

we perceive bodies, forms. To get out of one's body, or to exceed a coherent and separate subject position (where "I am Her" for example) is to exceed conventional understandings of skin. Skin – like "the body" – is always already a metaphor for individuality, for separation, a metaphor that works to keep bodies distinct from each other. The status of skin as corporeal metaphor relies on the interplay of skin as a fact of embodiment (incorporation), and as an abstract linguistic construct (inscription). We each have an external skin, a body surface. It marks the limits of our bodies; it demarcates a "border" (Kristeva *Powers* 4) between the "inside" and the "outside," between "self" and "other". By writing merged identities and subject positions onto each other, and by creating palimpsestic surfaces onto which bodies are written, H.D. ruptures the skin's threshold between self and other: she forces bodies to share skin, to share a corporeal surface. As I will argue in this thesis, these bodies that share skin, because they are incorporated in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction, have profound implications for our understanding of H.D.'s perception of material bodies.

The dominant metaphor in the following three chapters will be the image and practice of palimpsest. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines palimpsest as "A parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing" ("Palimpsest, n."). The key to understanding "palimpsest" as a salient metaphor for an intertextual and/or layered piece of writing is that feature of imperfection of a palimpsest: that the earlier writing is still visible, is imperfectly erased, and so the palimpsestic

text becomes contradictory, layered, a document of a simultaneous past and present. Much has been written about H.D.'s palimpsestic writing style and practice in her poetry, but few critics have approached her autobiographical prose with the idea of palimpsest in mind.[3] In her autobiographical fiction, past and present over- and under-write each other as H.D.'s older self writes her younger self, or as Virginia Woolf puts it, as the "I now" writes the "I then" (75). Furthermore, the repetitious prose style and syntax of H.D.'s autobiographical narratives produce the effect of what Gertrude Stein calls "continuous" presence ("Portraits" 105-106). That is, each image, in cinematic-style flickering fashion, is (like words on a palimpsest) continuously present with each other image. H.D.'s palimpsestic autobiographical style requires that bodies share the same page, surface, skin. To understand the sharing of skin, the radical re-writing of bodies that this requires, is to better understand H.D.'s autobiographical fiction, theories of language, and her theories of the body and sexuality implicit in this writing.[4] While H.D.'s palimpsestic writing is certainly a practice of inscription, I understand it to be an incorporated writing as well. Each layer of her text is its own text, is incorporated like a body, different, unique, independent of the other layers, and yet when inscribed onto the palimpsest, H.D.'s bodies becomes integrated, obscured by the other layers. The body (of text) can no longer be differentiated from the other (textual) bodies; instead that body of text, the body that stands in for the physical bodies which it writes, becomes a relation, an interplay between limits and spaces, between the physical body and the textual inscription.

Everything about which I am writing is always already a metaphor. As I have earlier noted, the "body is a congealed metaphor" (Halyes 284). Palimpsest, as well, is a metaphor for a kind of writing, which in turn operates as metaphor for a kind of consciousness. Skin stands in as boundary between bodies and thus can be understood to work as the "continuous flexible integument forming the usual external covering" ("Skin") around the metaphorical body. Writing about H.D.'s autobiographical fiction is also a project in metaphor, since autobiographical fiction *as a genre* is necessarily metaphorical because the characters *à clef* stand in for, resemble (but are not the same as) the living people who they re-present. The autobiographical novel, then, acts as metaphor for the life of the author, since the novel is like, but can never "repeat [. . .] experiences as they were lived" (Elbaz, 9).

My purpose here is, through the juggling of these metaphors, to understand H.D.'s fictional/autobiographical novels – in particular I will be dealing with her romans à clef – as examples of impressive and radical linguistic gymnastics. And these linguistic gymnastics have considerable philosophical implications; by writing bodies that merge, share skin, H.D. is a kind of modernist radical cheerleader for genderfuck, and beyond that even, for *skinfuck*. H.D. writes beyond even the gender dichotomy and attacks the realm even more sacred than that of gender – she attacks the ideology of the Individual and exposes it as fraudulent. Palimpsest necessitates the sharing of surface, of skin, and as such it realizes a kind of post- (liberal) humanist headspace that is difficult to achieve when we experience, or know, the surface of our bodies, our skin, as the physical

marker, or threshold, of self-awareness, self-identity, self-hood. As the palimpsestic text refuses to exist as "a self-enclosed entity" (Elbaz 3), so too are the bodies on/in the palimpsest always in excess of their borders, of their skin. As a result, these bodies are always in excess of the binaries upon which Western culture is built: (among others) self/other, inside/outside, sameness/difference. H.D.'s fictional/ autobiographical writing is annoying, nagging, discomfiting. It is hard to read because in the very process of reading one must necessarily be engaged in a constant re-negotiation of comfortable assumptions. There is no relaxing into H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. The reading is more of a wrestle.

In order to fully demonstrate the meaningfulness of "palimpsestic autobiography as skin" I have opted to read four of H.D.'s romans à clef, in three chapters, using three theoretical frameworks. In Chapter One, "The Semiotics of (Shared) Skin: Signifying Beyond Difference in *HER* and *Asphodel*," I read *HER* and *Asphodel* in light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of similarity/difference. While H.D. writes bodies with shared surfaces in *HER*, thus merging subject/object, self/other, she spends as much time separating these same binaries/characters in the sequel novel, *Asphodel*. Chapter One is thus a discussion of the importance of difference in language, and how H.D. negotiates difference in these two novels. In Chapter Two, "'I almost got out of my body': Shared Skin as (Porous) Identity in *Nights*," I discuss skin as the corporeal limit which we experience as the threshold between individual, autonomous, discrete bodies. As such, I discuss the ideology of the Liberal Individual in relation to H.D.'s *Nights*. Natalia Saunderson (I have already mentioned that Nat is the H.D.

figure in this novel) has a casual relationship with corporeal limits and, as I will show, her disregard for boundaries is written in the ways in which she merges with other characters in the novella. In the context of this chapter, I incorporate notions of bodies, naming, and ideology in order to reveal how H.D.'s palimpsestic autobiography, and the writing of many bodies onto one surface, challenges liberal humanist theories of the Individual. Chapter Three, "Palimpsest and Repetition: The Cinematics of Shared Skin in *Palimpsest*," is a reading of H.D.'s *Palimpsest* through the lens of Stein's "Portraits and Repetition". In this chapter I argue, following Stein's theory "that there is no such thing as repetition," that H.D.'s palimpsestic style of autobiography, which is characterized by mis-repetition, or linguistic flickering, produces the effect of "one thing not many," of bodies sharing surface, of sharing skin.

A brief explication of the structure of this thesis: The "Notes" to each chapter are to be read as a kind of inter-text. I have elected to write most of the "theory" into the "Notes," and the effect of this structure, I hope, is that the thesis itself reads as a kind of palimpsest. The body of each chapter is mostly comprised of a close reading of one or more of H.D.'s autobiographical novels and the "Notes" contain the theoretical background that informs my readings. The backward and forward reading of the thesis – like the writing of it – of flipping from the body of the chapter to the "Notes," and then back to the body of the text should serve to superimpose the "Notes" onto the body of the text and the text's body onto the "Notes".

"The Skinny"

The end result of this thesis will be that all of these metaphors that I am juggling will matter in the context of H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. I will show that the metaphor of skin is productive, constitutive, and confining. It is produced by, resides in, and reinforces a paradigm of distinction. The metaphor of palimpsest provides an "out" of this paradigm. In order to recognize this "out," however, one must think radically about whether or not bodies can share surface, whether or not they can "occupy the same space simultaneously". At the end of Chapter 2, I gesture toward the notion of a "thought experiment". In many ways, that is what this thesis is – a thought experiment in three chapters. Of course we do not "share" skin with others. But how invested are we in our experience of separateness, and what kinds of lateral associations do we make simply by understanding ourselves to be different, separate, distinct? Is our addiction to skin in all its embodied and metaphorical manifestations something worth thinking about? I think that H.D. says that it is, and that is the underlying premise for the following pages.

Notes

[1] Here I refer to Elizabeth Grosz's assertion that "there is no body as such: there are only *bodies*" (19).

[2] Henceforth *HER*.

[3] See, for example, Michael Hardin's "H.D.'s *Trilogy:* Speaking Through the Margins; Erika Rohrbach's "H.D. and Sappho: 'A Precious Inch of Palimpsest'"; Nathanial Mackey's "Palimpsestic Stagger"; and Melody Zajdel's "'I See Her Differently:' H.D.'s *Trilogy* as Feminist Response to Masculine Modernism." Of course, those who have focussed on H.D.'s novel *Palimpsest*, like Susan Stanford Friedman and Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, have discussed H.D.'s prose as palimpsestic. See Friedmans' *Penelope's Web* especially her section entitled, "Ghost Stories: (Un)Masking the Self in *Palimpsest* and *Hedylus*, and Kloepfer's "Fishing Up the Murex: Sense and Resonance in H.D's *Palimpsest*."

[4] Cassandra Laity has argued, and I agree with her, that, "[a]lthough H.D. did not write essays detailing the do's and don'ts of modernism, her reviews, memoirs, letters, notes, and particularly H.D.'s several fictional autobiographies, provide a career-long narrative of her modernist practice" (xiii). I thus read H.D.'s autobiographical fiction to be a long manifesto on language and bodies.

Chapter One

The Semiotics of (Shared) Skin: Signifying Beyond Difference in *HER* and *Asphodel*

She said, "I am Hermione Gart," but
Her Gart was not that. She was nebulous . . .

-- H.D. *HER* (3)

The blue vitriol of Fayne's letter had
left its scar but on the whole, was she
not proud of it? Scar that she hadn't
turned from, wound that was not
repudiated. It was so deep, so terrible
that it was almost a joy to have it. . . .
[T]he odd vitriolic blue that had been
the burning destructive acid of the
letter had almost cauterized
the death wound.

-- H.D. *Asphodel* (77)

Prelude

Difference keeps us separate; it distinguishes. This chapter is about difference in language and in perception(s) of subjectivity, of self-ness. It is about how writing can be stretched beyond difference, or beyond relations of difference, even if difference is the foundation of language, and thus of writing.

Skin keeps us separate; it distinguishes. This chapter is about skin in language and in perceptions(s) of subjectivity, of self-ness. It is about how writing can be stretched beyond skin, or beyond relations of skin, even if skin is the foundation of language, and thus of writing.

Differently Skinned

The principle of difference, and thus of distinction, is of paradigmatic importance to Modern Western ways of being and knowing, of seeing and hearing, of perception. We understand the world through a continuous and apparently necessary series of negations: we define ourselves and others in relation to what we are not. In this chapter, I will discuss, using structural linguistic theory, our ontological and epistemological dependence on difference. My use of structural linguistics helps to reveal how H.D. writes beyond, or against difference; she insists that her readers experience an alternate, a not-always differential, form of existence. H.D. writes from, and about, a subject position – a narrative, psychic, and linguistic space – that is sometimes between and often in excess of difference. As such, she experiments, in her autobiographical novels, with her "self" as fiction, leaving the reader to grapple with a work that confounds the fundamental contrariety of binary relations.

The sequential romans à clefs, *HER* (1926-7) and *Asphodel* (1921-2) provide much material for a discussion of oppositionality, shared surfaces, and metaphors of skin in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction. *HER* fictionally explores H.D.'s (Hermione's)[1] "life in Philadelphia in the period before her departure for Europe" (Spoo xii). *Asphodel* takes up where *HER* leaves off: the first scene of *Asphodel* takes place on a boat crossing the Atlantic from America to Europe.[2] While there is much blending of skin and surface in *HER*, there is much alienation and severing of bodies from each other in *Asphodel*. Characters merge in *HER*

and separate in *Asphodel*: H.D. writes against difference in *HER*, but seemingly by it in *Asphodel*.

What I am most interested in here are the ways that H.D. uses and abuses language – which is oppositionally structured – in order to create a sense of, or produce the effect of, shared skin.[3] My discussion will thus revolve more closely around *HER* and more tangentially around *Asphodel*. While H.D. uses many disruptive body/language tropes,[4] I have elected to highlight three of the most prominent. First, I will discuss how H.D. produces the effect of palimpsest by writing the future/present onto the past/present, thus providing a template for shared surfaces within the text. Second, working with the idea of palimpsest, I will illustrate how H.D.'s repetitive syntax works to create simultaneously singular and plural skin, and how skin is graphed as a surface that is always already more than, and only one. Finally, I will consider how H.D. constructs, maintains, and relies upon a thoroughgoing image system of shared surface in *HER* (with some cross-over to *Asphodel*). Recurring images of mirrors reflect characters (subjects) onto a common surface, and by writing multiple characters as having "marble" skin, H.D. generates the affect and effect of a collective skin and by extension, a shared subjectivity.[5]

Palimpsest as Template for Skin in *HER*

> Everything had been erased,
> would be written on presently.
>
> -- H.D. *HER* (221-2)

As a "textual form," H.D.'s palimpsestic writing "restages the drama of subjectivity" (Benstock *Textualizing* xv) or, more accurately, restages the drama of a layered and multiple subjectivity. In *Textualizing the Feminine*, Shari Benstock notes that a palimpsestic text "is a contested site where diverse, fragmented, and conflicting inscriptions coexist in an endless present simultaneously documenting and destroying its own history" and as such it "provides a productive metaphor for psychic existence". Within a palimpsestic text, "no coherent picture emerges from its multiplicities and contradictions" (Benstock *Textualizing*165) and "past and present, here and there, cannot be clearly delineated" (Benstock *Textualizing* 166). In *HER*, H.D. creates a palimpsestic surface upon which past and present exist without explicit distinction, thus creating the effect of exposure and erasure, of a textual body that is at once past and present, one and many. The surface of a palimpsestic textual body reads as a study in contradictions; it can never be definitively interpreted because it has no easy oppositional other.

At the beginning of *HER*, Hermione's future/present self diagnoses her past/present self, literally incorporating future and past selves into the text and inscribing both onto it:

> Her Gart had no word for her dementia, it was predictable by star, by star-sign, by year.
>
> But Her Gart was then no prophet. She could not predict later common usage of uncommon syllogisms; "failure complex,"

> "compensation reflex," and that conniving phrase, "arrested development" had opened no door to her. Her development, forced along slippery lines of exact definition, marked supernorm, marked subnorm on some sort of chart or soul-barometer. She could not distinguish the supernorm, dragging her up from the subnorm, letting her down. (3)

This passage, from the first page of the novel, offers a diagnosis of complexes and reflexes in advance of the description of the symptoms (the novel is a symptomatic narrative, following the psychic journey of Hermione through several psychic episodes). The future/present writes over, preempting, the past/present; the labels of mental illness are written onto, exist before, the story of Hermione's dementia. She inscribes her future knowledge onto her past self. Writing itself becomes subject for the palimpsest, as we are told, "it had not occurred to Her to try and put the thing in writing" (13). The future, then, is present, continuously inscribed and informed with what we must necessarily understand to be the past: "Words that had not (in Philadelphia) been invented, beat about them: Oedipus complex, inferiority complex, claustrophobia. Words beat and sizzled and a word bent backward like a saw in a sawmill reversed, turned inward, to work horrible destruction" (15). The "word bent backward," like "complex," reaches behind itself on the page to inflect the story that would happen before it was invented/written/known.

The palimpsestic text/surface does the work of forgetting and remembering. It, as Benstock writes, "exposes remnants of previous writings

('memories') lost and regained through erasure ('forgetting')" (*Textualizing* 165). Hermione uses the palimpsest of future/present and past/present to integrate multiple parts of herself which are herself, and parts of herself which conventionally would be understood to be other(s).

I will say, going back and back, remembering with the surface, the lava Her-surface that is sure to get me, I will say with the incarcerating part of Her Gart, all that was vague, we can only imagine such things. Fayne Rabb will become part of yesterday. I hold Fayne now for one last moment . . . (215)

Hermione looks to this surface of herself, upon which past, present, future, Her and Fayne exist, to "remember" and "hold" things which in any realm, or on any surface, other than a palimpsest could only be imagined.

I have begun my discussion of *HER* with this rendering of the palimpsestic quality of the novel in order to evoke the effect and affect of the writing: it is the effect of "drag[ging] Her across Her" (215). The writing brings to mind an imperfectly erased past/present beneath and emerging through the future/present. Hermione claims that she is "[s]mudged out" (73) in particular by George's kisses, but more generally, this refrain of Her being "smudged out" creates the impression that she has been written and is then imperfectly erased. As Her is "smudged out," and the older-Her appears over the younger-Her, "[t]hings emerged, people emerged" (133).

H.D. also writes palimpsest with the language of layers: objects of the same colour placed on top of each other, create a surface which is multiple, but has the illusion of one. Hermione observes that "in Pennsylvania it had never

occurred to people to paint green on green, one slice in a corner that made a triangle out of another different dimension" (6). Much later in the novel she notes, "Her was held like a star invisible in daylight that suddenly by some shift adjustment of phosphorescent values comes quite clear. Her saw Her as a star shining white against winter daylight" (225). As Derrida explains in his explication of *différance*, the way to write through, beyond binaries is to write by using a double gesture, "a writing that is and of itself multiple" (*Positions* 41). Furthermore, this double gesture can be understood, through Derrida's work on *différance*, as "a strategy without finality" (*Writing* 7), a constant deferral of meaning that resists a transcendental truth outside of itself. By specifying layered elements that are the same yet different – "green on green," "a star shining white against winter daylight" – H.D. performs a multiple gesture. By repeating invocations of layered images she trains the reader to see surface as variably and multiply written, to look for elements which are both the same and different. The palimpsestic layers of the text multiply and defer meaning as the reader recognizes that there is no way to interpret the palimpsest except as a text in process.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *HER* is its disruptive syntax, and the ways in which – through syntax – H.D. merges subject and object, thus defying differential relations of language and being. As Dianne Chisholm notes, "'Her' functions syntactically as subject in sentence structure, but in narrative discourse 'Her' occupies the position of object" (*Auto* 91). Thus, as I noted in my introduction, the syntax of Hermione's refrain "I am Her" merges the subject and

object onto one surface. Syntactically, subject and object operate differently in a sentence, existing in relation to, but different from, each other. They serve different functions, and as Kristeva notes in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, syntax makes the (invisible, expected) divisions between the discrete functions of the subject and object "plain and actual" (54).[6] Furthermore, Kristeva has also noted that grammar, and the practice of structural and generative linguistics, adheres to "the same presuppositions" which uphold the autonomous, individuated, and binary-defined Cartesian subject (*Desire* 128).

Implicit in the grammatical rule that subject and object remain separate is the concept of alienation and difference. The two cannot be one: each must be contained and discrete. By bringing together "I" and/am "Her" H.D. fuses subject and object, self and other, not in one coherent, unified body, but on a surface where both can exist. Alienation requires a proliferation of surfaces, because each discrete subject, object, each "self" and each "other" must have its own skin. When subject and object are written palimpsestically, are fused syntactically, the boundaries between them are ruptured, and thus, they can share a surface. The repetitive nature of H.D.'s prose "realign[es] [. . .] the relationship between subject and object, form and content" (Benstock *Left* 328). As Benstock notes in her chapter on H.D. in *Women of the Left Bank*, H.D. exposes oppositions not "through the image," but rather "in the image". Benstock also explains that the "linguistic split" (between word and object) marks for H.D. "a psychic split" (329), one that she registers in the images she chooses. The writing, then, *is* the

image. The form produces the content; the process of writing the self, of representing the body, produces skin, and becomes the/a meaning.

Let me explain what I mean. In the series of repetitions, "She is Her. I am Her. Her is Fayne. Fayne is Her" (181) H.D. syntactically elides "She," "I," and "Fayne" with "Her" thus giving us the following linguistic equation:

She = Her.

I = Her.

Fayne = Her.

Therefore,

She = I = Fayne = Her

"She," "I," "Fayne," and "Her" are written differently but the same; their only distinction is in their lettering, in the body of the script, in the metaphorical "skin" that normally would act as boundary between discrete objects/subjects/words. But they are no longer entirely discrete since they equal each other. I suggest that, taken as palimpsest, as re-inscriptions of the same, the linguistic image can be understood to look like this:

I am FSAHHYENERE

"Fayne," "She," and "Her," remain visible, but their skin is breached, they are no longer entirely separate – they are multiple, but not discrete. The form of the novel – the syntax – operates as content, creating meaning, and constituting the narrative. The palimpsest of Fayne and Her, their indistinguishability, however, is

not only rendered as linguistic image, although syntax does reinforce the moment of merging: "Her bent forward, face bent toward Her" (163). The two are one, indistinguishable as they kiss, and even their lips – "Lips long since half kissed away. Curled lips long since half kissed away" (163) – are partially erased, blended, smudged out, and still emerging. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes, "[s]yntax dissolves linearity into circularity and differentiation into sameness, thereby fusing the two women 'into a concentric unity' at the moment they kiss. [. . .] This touch [. . .] erases the differences between the women" (*Penelope's* 115). The effect of shared surface, of palimpsest, operates as an "effect of subjectivity as it is produced by the structure of the text" (Derrida *Positions* 88). In her discussion of *Jehan de Saintré*, Kristeva discusses the "dual surface of the text," which is produced by "the scriptural activity having been narrated and the narrative having been often interrupted to allow the act of production to surface" (*Desire* 56). I am struck that H.D.'s palimpsestic prose functions in the same way, surfacing the process of self-production, while simultaneously producing the self.

Mirrors and Marble: Suggestions of Surface

> [S]he tried to concentrate on one frayed disc of green,
> pool or mirror that would refract image. She was nothing.
> She must have an image no matter how fluid, how inchoate.
>
> -- H.D. *HER* (5)

H.D. does not directly offer up the concept of shared surface: she suggests it.[7] A mirror which reflects multiple bodies (but holds all bodies, all skin on one mirrored surface) is a recurring image in *HER*. The mirror – the reflection of

multiple bodies onto one surface – is an image to which the reader becomes accustomed. Hermione notices and reflects upon these surfaces. When she is alone, she cannot see herself; her reflected image is only visible when it shares the reflection with another. When she looks to "one frayed disc of green, pool or mirror that would refract image" (5), she cannot see herself: "She was nothing" (5). Hermione thus decides that "[s]he must have an image no matter how fluid, how inchoate" (5). The images she finds are necessarily fluid, or hard to define, for they require her own skin to be written and reflected with the skin of others. Images of Hermione are consistently shared in the novel, and reflections of *self and other* are necessarily fraught with the struggle between self-differentiation and merged, non-binary identities. For example, when Eugenia smiles, "[i]t's like a face seen under bottleglass" (88), and Hermione decides "[w]e're all green like faces underwater . . . no. Not all green . . ." (88). Mandy, Hermione notes is "different" but "they – Hermione, Eugenia – were bottle-green" (88). Hermione thinks but does not say that Mandy "is a bronze [. . .] is like a bronze giving out iridescence like a flying fish, there is a blue-green iridescence across the copper polish and her face is fixed like a bronze face" (88). It is difficult to parse this passage in a satisfactory way. My initial response was simply that Eugenia and Hermione share some kind of reflected surface, wherein they both appear "bottle-green". Later, repetition creates the effect of palimpsest as it functions syntactically and figuratively to bring together the bodies onto one withdrawing surface: "Hermione had drawn away, forgotten herself. Eugenia had drawn away [sic] forgotten herself" (89). The pull of differentiation is still present and strong

in the novel however, for when Her's father, Carl, calls her "Eugenia," Hermione responds, "'I am not Eugenia, I'm Hermione" (99). Negation and affiliation remain in constant tension throughout the novel, and extend beyond it into H.D.'s other autobiographical fiction, as I will discuss shortly.

It is important to note that Mandy, the servant (and based on this description, dark-skinned) is figured as the surface upon which the white women are reflected, her skin being the skin onto which Eugenia and Hermione merge, thus the three women merge. Mandy, however, is marked as "different"; it appears as if H.D. can conceive of erasing corporeal boundaries and difference between the white folks of the novel, yet must keep the different skins of white and dark separate, distinct, literally marked, written, as "different".

When taking tea at Nellie Thorpe's, Hermione notes how "[a] convex Victorian mirror above the head of the girl opposite showed Nellie and Hermione tilted sidewise, making an exaggerated puffed out little Dutch group of them" (51). Later, she remarks upon that same mirror and through repetition juxtaposes it with her head. She describes the mirror as "[p]olished surface that was the slightly convex mirror hanging above the left shoulder of the creature sitting opposite. She knew the name of the creature seated opposite who had made walls heave and walls fall and straight lines run to infinity in the polished surface left between groups of people talking" (74). In the last sentence of the paragraph above these lines, Hermione's head is described as "round-marble-polished surface" (74). By describing both the mirror (upon which surface is shared) and Hermione's head as "polished surface," H.D. aligns the two images, making them

one. Hermione's head, then, becomes a mirror, a surface on which multiple bodies share space. Later Hermione "realized her head – the bit here, the bit there, the way it fitted bit to bit – was two convex mirrors placed back to back. The two convex mirrors placed back to back became one mirror . . . as Fayne Rabb entered" (138). The mirrors merge, and thus their reflections merge when Hermione beholds Fayne: on a seamless surface Fayne becomes incorporated onto Her. The mirror/Hermione's head is convex (rounded) and reflects an obscure, inchoate image of bodies on surface; outlines can distinguish the images between skins, but there is no way to differentiate each from any other upon the surface – two dimensionally, front and back, the mirror image merges bodies, and acts as visual metaphor for shared surface. The recurring images of reflection materialize a sense of "[b]odies beyond these bodies and these bodies are nothing" (*HER* 177); skin no longer operates as a body limit, a metaphor and visual aid which separates individuals, but rather as a possibility for existence *beyond*, or in excess of, a differential experience of skin.

Finally, the most striking metaphor for shared surface in *HER* is that of multiple bodies of marble.[8] As already noted, Hermione experiences her own body (her head) as marble –"marble-polished-surface" – and, as I will illustrate, H.D. uses the trope of marble skin to suggest that the bodies of the novel are not conventionally distinguishable. When Hermione "slipped a long hand into the open space of the wide flung wide collar" of George's summer shirt she "felt a smooth surface of polished clear smooth marble" (75). George is marble. Hermione experiences her head as a "round marble-polished surface" (74). The

references to George as marble surface and Hermione as marble surface occur in quick succession (in my copy of the novel they fall on facing pages) thus making the shared reference easily noticeable; by repetition then, the suggestion that Hermione and George share surface is palpable. Furthermore, Hermione also experiences Fayne as marble: "The mouth was straight now, the mouth of a boy hunter. [. . .] Marble lifted from marble and showed a boy" (163). As they kiss and blend, it becomes impossible to distinguish between Fayne and Hermione: "'And I—I'll make you breathe, my breathless statue.' 'Statue? You—*you* are the statue'" (163).[9] This dialogue is unattributed, and thus the reader is unable to determine who (Fayne/Her) delivers each line. Later, marble again ties Her and Fayne together syntactically: "Keep a marble self for a marble self, Her for Her, Her for Fayne exactly" (177). As I have argued earlier, because Fayne = Her, distinguishability becomes less important once the threshold of skin has been crossed and bodies/people start to merge. George, Fayne, and Her have a marble surface in common and in this narrative where conventional notions of skin surfaces are in question, this shared marble surface certainly suggests continuity between/beyond skin(s).

Separate Surface and Seared Skin

> Drawn to you I am repulsed, drawn away from you, I am negated.
>
> -- H.D. *HER* (146)

H.D.'s *Asphodel* performs the work of separating what was merged in *HER*. In particular, the relationship of shared surfaces, the interchangeability of

Fayne and Her, is relinquished in this text, although confusingly, confoundingly so. Upon their gradual "break up," Her tells Fayne, "But I'm something different. [. . .] I'm something else. Different" (53). And when a letter arrives telling Her of Fayne's marriage, the news figuratively severs the shared surface, leaving Her with a scar: "The touch of the letter left a scar across the fingers that opened it, scar of burning acid, not of fire, scalding not searing. Scalding and searing" (76). The scar is a mark "that she hadn't turned from, a wound that she had not repudiated" (77), and thus a necessary separation into heteronormative language divisions, wherein they each get married and change their names; Her is not longer Fayne.

I am interested in dealing with *Asphodel* here because, as the book is in sequential order following *HER*, it works with and against *HER*. While H.D. merely suggests the sharing of skin in *HER,* the symbolic seared, scarred skin in *Asphodel* materializes into flesh H.D.'s images of surface: palimpsest, mirrors, marble. In *Asphodel*, H.D. writes her (pregnant) body's surface as "parchment flesh" (153). To write the pregnant, double body as parchment implies the writing of two onto, into one; her body changing and the "parchment-like plain substance" of her skin, of the boundary between her(self) and this other (baby) "becomes fluid" (158). The body written as parchment takes on great significance when we remember the important palimpsestic writing of *HER*: Hermione's skin as parchment, can, following the tropes of *HER*, be read as a single surface upon which is necessarily written layered multiplicities and contradictions. The parchment skin is one that contains many.

While H.D.'s syntax become regulated when Fayne gets married, Hermione notices the change from a language of similarity, where Her = Fayne, to a language of heteronormative difference. After Fayne's marriage, Her remarks that when "Fayne Rabb lifted her little hand . . . it was not the hand of Fayne Rabb. It was the hand of something other separated forever from Fayne Rabb" (79). Fayne is separated from Fayne (and thus from Hermione) because Fayne is no longer Fayne, she is "Mrs. – Mrs. –" (78). Hermione is separated from Fayne Rabb and cannot find her because, after this distinction is made – Fayne's name changes – she is permanently distinguished from Hermione and Her forgets "what the name was" (78). Fayne no longer equals Her.

Even though bodies separate and skins become conventionally distinct from each other in *Asphodel*, H.D. still challenges the signifying power of language, still works against the grain of signification, against language that works on the grounds of negation. Language is rendered unsatisfactory, as H.D. calls attention to the already absent nature of experience, to the impossibility of language and representation. H.D. notes that "you couldn't write the way" Mademoiselle Raigneau says "Walter," although she tries to phonetically write it out: "Vrrralter" (32). Further, although she attempts to be "exact" (48) with language, she realizes that she can't "achieve" her "meaning" (40). She tries to record impossible sounds, things, but like the recording of shared surface, she finds language comes up short: "'A miz-zen—ha, ha, ho.' But that isn't how people laugh." (48). H.D. finds that descriptive, representational language is a

barrier to meaning when trying to record exactly an experience that exists outside of the norm.

Differential language negates experience that is non-differential, in particular when dealing with bodies that exceed binary gender codes: "I don't want to be (as they say crudely) a boy. Nor do I want you to so be. I don't feel a girl. What is all this trash of Sappho? None of that seems real, to (in any way) matter" (53). A body that exists outside of the male/female split, outside of heteronormative relations of existence and desire, has no representational space within binary language and its structures. Her's experience of desire, and of sharing skin (which exceeds man/woman) with Fayne, does not "seem real," seems not to "matter," when forced to be rendered in language, when differentiated, when split. In Chapter 2, I will in detail discuss how language operates as an epistemological and ontological template which exercises ideological power in limiting the kinds of bodies that can and cannot exist, be represented, in language. Our experience with H.D., however, will reveal that image transcends language, and with images and suggestions of shared skin, H.D. works outside of the confines of direct representation, allowing us to perceive ways of being that we cannot actually articulate.

Notes

[1] Hermione is one name (of many) which H.D. used to refer to a fictional version of herself; it is the name of a persona, and is common to both *HER* and *Asphodel*. Susan Stanford Friedman provides an excellent discussion of H.D.'s noms de plume and personae in *Penelope's Web*. See, in particular, the section "Names: Noms de Plume, Noms de Guerre, Noms de Paix" (35-46), and , regarding H.D.'s personae (which includes Hermione of *HER* and *Asphodel*) see pp. 79-86 wherein Friedman argues, "[t]hese personae are superimpositions for fictional others, but also for herself as a living woman who (re)creates herself in the writing" (79).

[2] It may be more accurate to say that *HER* "takes up" in the space/time before *Asphodel* begins. The events of *HER* precede those of *Asphodel* and so it might be referred to as a pre-quel, since it was written after and the period it covers takes place chronologically before the period covered by *Asphodel*. However, as Robert Spoo notes in the "Introduction" to his edition of *Asphodel*, "[v]arious statements by H.D. suggest that *Asphodel* was first composed in 1921-22 and then revised a few years later, but the precise date of the surviving typescript is uncertain" (xvi). *Asphodel* may have been revised after *HER* was written, and in consideration of the events/images of its pre-quel. In my discussion of skin and shared surface in these two novels, I will be drawing on similar themes, images, and metaphors in the texts, and furthermore, be writing

about the novels as the events within them occur(ed), rather then the order in which they may have been written.

[3] In *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure explains that linguistic signals are "constituted solely by differences" (117). Furthermore, he notes, "[i]n language, as in every other semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it, nothing more. Difference is what makes characteristics [. . .] there is always an opposition of terms involved" (119). Following "Saussure's account of language" Linda Zerelli explains,

> [t]o think about language in this way – as articulation rather than representation, as defined by the principle of difference rather than identity – is to recognize, for example, that the term 'woman' has no meaning apart from the term 'man,' that both derive their meaning from the differences between them and, what is more, those between them and all other terms. Man and woman emerge through the process of signification, as the effect of the play of innumerable differences. They are unstable since [. . .] the most precise characteristic of each resides in being what all other terms are not. (3-4)

Language, then, written and spoken, relies on a distinction or a series of distinctions, between characters in order to make sense. Or, in Saussure's words, "[t]he entire mechanism of language [. . .] is based upon oppositions [. . .] and upon the phonetic and conceptual differences they involve" (119). Importantly, Saussure notes that, in a sign, "what matters more than any idea or sound

associated with it is what other signs surround it" (118). Of course, as Lacan, Derrida, and many others have noted, the distinction Saussure makes between "signifier" and "signified" is unsustainable, since "every signified is also in the position of signifier" (Derrida *Positions* 20). Also see: Lacan's *Écrits: A Selection* ("The Meaning of the Letter," 149-159) and Derrida's *Writing and Difference* ("Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 278-293). What is most useful for my purposes, is the Saussurian concept that a sign cannot exist in isolation. A sign can only exist, mean something, in its difference from other signs.

[4] I borrow the notion of "disruptive language tropes" from Cassandra Laity, who uses the term in the context of her discussion on traces of Decadence in H.D.

[5] In the same way that language operates through negation, so too does subjectivity, according to psychoanalytic accounts of subject formation. As Nancy Chodorow has explained, "an essential early task of infantile development [. . .] involves the development of ego boundaries (a sense of personal psychological division from the rest of the world) and a body ego (a sense of the permanence of one's physical separateness and the predictable boundedness of one's own body, a distinction between inside and outside)" (10). In conventional (Freud's) psychoanalytic formulation, "[d]ifferentiation happens *in relation to* the mother. [. . .] Developing separateness thus involves, in particular, perceiving the mother [. . .] as separate and 'not-me,' where once these were an undifferentiated symbiotic unity" (Chodorow 10 Ellipses in original). Chodorow goes on to note that

"separateness is defined relationally; differentiation occurs in relationship: 'I' am 'not-you.'" (10). So, cognitively, in the same way that in structural linguistics "t" is "not-d" and "not-e" and "not-c," etc., so too, in psychoanalytic theory, is "I" "not-you" and "not-he" and "not-she." "I" is different-from.

Not all of psychoanalytic theory revolves around differentiation *from the mother*. Jacques Lacan recasts "the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm [. . .] redirect[ing] [. . .] attention to what he described as the 'mirror stage,' critical to the subject's entry into language" (Smith and Watson 18). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that "[i]n the mirror stage the child comes to recognize its image in the looking glass; but as it looks in the glass it sees its image as an other. On the one hand, this image as other gives back to the child a semblance of a coherent identity. On the other hand, through acknowledgement of its image, the child mis/recognizes itself as a unified subject" (18). Lacan's guiding principle is "the notion that the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan *Four* 203). Lacan asserts, "[t]he Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be present of the subject – it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear" (*Four* 203). Similar to Saussure's emphasis on the relational meanings through differentiation of language signs, Lacan "stress[es] the operation of the realization of the subject in his signifying dependence in the locus of the Other" (206). The Subject (always male in Lacan's formulation) is formed through its entrance into language, which happens at the moment of mis/recognition and is accompanied by an on-going alienation from the image of the Other – "a split in the subject that can never be

sutured" (Smith and Watson 18). The subject, operating under the fiction of a coherent, unified self, continues to distinguish himself through a process of separation, a "superimposition of two lacks" (*Four* 214). Lacan's parsing of "*separate*" is a useful way to understand the process: "*Separare,* to separate – I would point out at once the equivocation of the *se parare*, of the *se parer*, in all the fluctuating meaning it has in French. It means not only to dress oneself, but also to defend oneself, to provide oneself with what one needs to be on one's guard" (*Four* 214). The notion of separation, then, similar to distinguish, of *keeping* separate, different, is at the root of our theories of language and being.

[6] S. Travis makes this connection. See "A Crack in the Ice: Subjectivity and the Mirror in H.D.'s *Her*" (126).

[7] Casandra Laity makes the point that H.D. "aspired beyond the confines of 'direct representation'" (47). Laity notes (following Adelaide Morris), that in "H.D.'s 1916 review of John Fletcher's *Goblins and Pagodas* [. . .] H.D. concedes that Fletcher 'uses the direct image it is true,' but praises his attempt as a 'more difficult . . . and richer form of art: not that of direct presentation, but that of suggestion'" (47 original H.D. quote from *The Egoist* 3 (1916): 183).

[8] Laity argues persuasively that "H.D. draws upon the sensuous passion for Greek statuary that had become a code for male homoeroticsm in Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde throughout her early work" (39). And as an autobiographical note, Laity reminds us that "H.D. herself treasured the small, childlike statue of the *Hermaphrodite* she visited whenever she was in Rome" (39).

[9] I must note here that a closet performance of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is the occasion for Her and Fayne's introduction. Shaw's *Pygmalion* is of course a re-telling of Ovid's myth of the sculptor Pygmalion and his statue Galatea. Furthermore, the trope of the statue is reinforced by Hermione's name, which recalls Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in which the Queen Hermione is revealed to have turned into a stone statue (V III). However, Her differentiates herself from Shakespeare's Hermione: "My name's Her. I am Her. She is Her. I am not Hermione out of Shakespeare" (*HER* 192).

Chapter Two

"I almost got out of my body": Shared Skin as (Porous) Identity in *Nights*

> . . . the site of authentication of personhood
> is the body occupied by a self-aware mind.
> This is no small consideration in a political
> economy based on individual private property
> and agency. . . . Dislocated multiplicity
> makes it difficult to trace culpability.
>
> -- Jodi O'Brien
> "Changing the Subject" (56)

> The epidermis is the most superficial layer
> of the skin and provides the first barrier
> of protection from the invasion of foreign
> substances into the body.
>
> -- Jeffrey L. Melton and Jason R. Swanson
> "Epidermis"

As I discussed in my Introduction, there is a scene in H.D.'s *Nights* which has stuck with me through months of research. It has become a kind of monkey on my back. It teases me. It taunts me. It dares me to test out a theory about the surface of bodies, skin, and the archival function of language, in particular, how skin is written into language, and how H.D.'s palimpsestic writing of skin, and corporeal surface in general, has a transformative effect on linguistic perceptions of being. Hence this chapter on the rarely-read, rarely-discussed *Nights*.

The scene goes as follows: After a night of passion Nat (the H.D. character in the novel) says to her lover, David, "I almost went too far, I almost got out of my body." David replies, "you did get out of your body" (66). Now,

initially this seemed to me like a fairly clichéd way to describe an intense sexual experience, and indeed I believe that is one way to interpret this scene. However, because this scene takes place in the context of a novel which does some fairly interesting things with bodies and language, whenever I return to it I am reminded of the often-cited passage from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*: "a body is itself defined, delimited, and articulated by what writes it. There is no law that is not inscribed on bodies. Every law has a hold on the body" (139).[1] Again, as I noted in my Introduction, this connection with de Certeau makes me wonder: Does getting out of one's body then, as Natalia does, mean that she temporarily escapes the writing of the body, the law, discourse?

In following this mode of inquiry, I began to consider how bodies are written in the rest of *Nights* and indeed in the rest of H.D.'s considerable oeuvre of autobiographical fiction (but here I will deal just with *Nights*). When reading with an eye for bodies, for skin, I have found that H.D.'s system of autobiographical fiction writing, which I have begun to call *palimpsestic autobiography*, engenders a kind of corporeal as well as linguistic style whereby bodies exceed the normal boundaries of the individual and, through a linguistic sharing of skin, through palimpsestic narrative, syntax, style, grammar, and lexicon, bodies merge. In *Nights,* the ideology of the individual is replaced by a more integrated subjectivity that has its emphasis not on what differentiates each from other, but on what each and other share. And what they share is skin.

In this chapter I will introduce a way of reading palimpsestic texts, in particular a way of reading *Nights*, that recognizes a sharing of skin, a sharing of

corporeal surface; I will demonstrate a way of reading palimpsestic autobiography that allows us, as readers, to experience bodies that merge onto and into each other. Through the merging of bodies and the sharing of skin, physical and psychic boundaries are rendered indistinct; in palimpsestic autobiography there is not a definite body ego, and thus there is no sure way to determine, for example, where one body starts and another ends – there is no distinct individual. Here it becomes important for me to acknowledge that while the epidermis, the external skin, as "visible, presentable surface" (Kristeva *Powers* 101), operates as "limit," it is also the location of contact between bodies: it is where bodies meet. In this chapter, however, I will be discussing skin as limit.[2] That is, I will be focusing on how we perceive that our "own" surface, our own skin, keeps us distinct – how, even when we touch another, there is no *merging into*, or *becoming* each other. We don't understand ourselves as *becoming a shared surface*; we understand skin as that which separates. My argument with respect to H.D.'s autobiographical fiction is that she suggests that skins merge, or as she writes in *Nights*, that they "melt together" (19). Moreover, I will argue that H.D. exposes how skin, as "the essential [. . .] boundary of biological and psychic individuation" (Kristeva *Powers* 101) functions implicitly as a separating device in language,[3] and in so doing, she exposes how our linguistic practices operate as archive for a liberal humanist model of self-hood, individuality, autonomy, and hierarchy.[4] As such, H.D. transforms the binary relations of language, those conventions whereby self/other, subject/object, inside/outside for example, are kept distinct. In my close reading of *Nights* I will illustrate how, by exposing the conventions of skin in

language and then by re-working those conventions, H.D. inscribes a system of porous physical and psychic identities.

To begin I will re-iterate my working definition of palimpsest. H.D.'s definition of palimpsest is "a parchment from which one writing has been erased to make room for another" (*Palimpsest* 1). We must remember here that the one writing is "imperfectly erased" and therefore still visible. So while it makes room for another writing, it remains part of the writing: the multiple writings share a surface. In discussing H.D.'s epic poem *Helen of Egypt* as what she calls a "psychic palimpsest," Shari Benstock writes: "a palimpsest exposes remnants of previous writings [. . .] lost and regained through erasure. [. . .] It is a contested site where diverse, fragmented, and conflicting inscriptions coexist in an endless present simultaneously documenting and destroying its own history [. . .] [upon which] no coherent picture emerges from its multiplicities and contradictions" (*Textualizing* 165). Palimpsest is like the Derridian notion of différance. It is "a writing that is in and of itself multiple" (*Positions* 41); it is "productive and conflictual" (*Positions* 44). Palimpsestic autobiography, then, writes the self as productive and conflictual. Rather than rely on the outside, or an "other" in order to lend some kind of internal coherence and stability to the "inside," or "self," palimpsestic subjectivity, as written in H.D.'s autobiographical fiction, is, to use her word, "inchoate" (*Nights* 60). Palimpsest is shared surface: it implies skin that is singular and multiple, skin that belongs to one and many.

Shared Names / Shared Skin

> Thus the subject, too, if he can appear
> to be the slave of language is all the more so of a
> discourse in the universal movement in which
> his place is already inscribed at birth,
> if only by the virtue of his proper name.
>
> -- Jacques Lacan *Écrits* (148)

Palimpsest is invoked variously in *Nights*. Most prominently, perhaps, is the palimpsestic quality of H.D.'s multiple selves: The first is H.D., the living author. The second is John Helforth, the pseudonymic editor of *Nights* and author of the prologue to the novel, a prologue which is a "pseuo-psychoanalytic pre-view of the text" (Chisholm *Freudian* 82). The third "self" is Natalia Saunderson, a persona who is presented as both author and autobiographical subject of Part II, and who is, as I noted in my Introduction, "H.D. herself—multifaceted, every nerve exposed" (Shaffner xi). H.D., John Helforth, and Natalia Saunderson reside in conflictual and productive relation wherein each informs the other, yet none is separate from the others. They are never outside of the other, and yet they constitute each other. They are a palimpsestic creation that is at all times singular and multiple; they are each always present and always absent, inscribed and erased.

The process of naming is important in *Nights* beyond the names H.D. creates for herself. In his prologue, John Helforth writes, "I can do no better than use the names in this manuscript, as Natalia Saunderson used them. Her name is not Natalia nor Saunderson, neither is her sister-in-law called Renne, nor her husband, Neil" (3). Names are rendered suspect then, cannot be relied upon to

refer directly to one contained body, one coherent identity, one subject. In palimpsestic autobiography the act of naming does not operate to the effect of what Butler calls the simultaneous "setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (*Bodies* 8). Rather, H.D.'s naming practice works against that convention: these names do not represent boundaries *per se*, and H.D.'s style works against the normative function of language. Instead of limiting, names in *Nights* add possibilities. As Perdita Shaffner notes in her introduction, the fictional prologue, by highlighting the fictional status of the character's names in the narrative, gives us "Fiction superimposed on fiction" (x); this superimposition produces the effect of palimpsest for it exposes the layers that are inscribed simultaneously in one text, on and in one surface.

Throughout the narrative, Natalia's name changes: "Natalia, they had called her; but it was Nat or Neith now. Neit or Neith is what he called her" (33). Her names are superinscribed onto each other, and as both "Neit" and "Neith" phonetically and typographically resemble "Neil," each name becomes a kind of re-inscription, the names in relation to each other creating the effect of palimpsest. As I discussed earlier, proper names in *Nights* do not necessarily correlate in a one-to-one equivalence to an individual. Nat becomes Neit and Neith. As these names blend into, become part of, Neil, and as "Neil" becomes part of "Neit" and "Neith" it becomes apparent that the reader can no longer expect to imagine a separate body, a body with its own skin, to correspond to a name. Indeed, skin literally merges, is connected, is shared, in *Nights*: "Neil she said, then 'Neith.' O, I am Natalia, this terrible Siamese-twin that she and Neil had been" (37). Like a

palimpsest, Neil and Neith/Natalia, written as "Siamese-twin," share surface, reside on/in the same skin; they are simultaneously separate and one. Later in Natalia's narrative, negation and separation are written as if working their way "across a wounded surface" (48): the shared surface is wounded when Neil and Natalia (Neith) are differentiated (by language, as I will explain presently) from each other.[5]

H.D. often creates the effect of shared surface in her autobiographical fiction by writing her characters as if they share a common surface material, a surface material that is not flesh. In the absence of flesh, H.D. draws attention to the surfaceness of skin. In *HER*, H.D. writes Her, Fayne, and George as marble. In *Nights,* she writes her characters as ice/glass/*la glace.*[6] Neil is referred to "as personifiable as frost" (43), and later Nat complains of the "clatter and the ice-insistence of Neil" (77). We are told that "Renne was ice" (61), and Nat is described several time as "shattered in pieces" (68) like the "sea-green glasses" (68). Renne and Neil are characterized as icy surfaces, and Nat is personified as a shatter-able surface, like ice or glass. David, on the other hand, "was red of some fire" (43). If Neil, Nat, and Renne all share a kind of surface, or the effect of surface, David, as fire, works to erase/separate what Shaffner characterizes as "a strange incestuous retinue" (ix-x). David's erasing/separating presence betrays the skin/surface connection of Neil, Nat, and Renne, revealing the incestuous merging of bodies, an instance of incest which is reinforced by a lack of separation, by a merging of positions, skin, in language. As Kristeva argues, incest in language occurs when there is a "meeting with the other" (*Desire* 191); it occurs when there

is no longer a linguistic/physical boundary between "I" and "other". [7] Because David is fire to the ice/glass/*la glace* of Nat, Neil, and Renne, he separates; his presence marks a break between bodies. And yet, fire and ice create a kind of palimpsestic effect, with fire melting (erasing) and ice/glass/*la glace* remaking itself (reinscribing).

In the same way that names/identities separate and merge in *Nights*, so too do the surfaces of ice/glass/*la glace*. And separate names, to insist upon them as David (fire) does, force a breach between bodies, personalities: "They have no names now, no identity. He will spoil everything if he insists on names, this fissure of personality. He will ruin the thing she is, the thing she lets herself be" (40). To conventionally use names is to refer to conventional, separate skins. Unless David (fire) allows Nat to be "the thing she lets herself be," that is, to reinscribe herself palimpsestically with shared skin, the fire will cease to work palimpsestically, and will simply erase/break between bodies, separate skins.

The Palimpsest Effect: Syntax, Pronouns, Exposure

> I am to trying to hear these fragile ways in which
> the body makes itself heard in language.
>
> -- Michel de Certeau
> *The Practice of Everyday Life* (131)

The effect of palimpsest in *Nights* is further produced by Helforth who, as the fictional editor of the narrative (and author of the prologue, Part I of *Nights*) notes, "Every line seemed to bleed fire. Or ice. Ice and fire" (21). Like the fire (David) and ice/glass/*la glace* (Nat, Neil, Renne) that H.D. uses in her

naming/identity practices in *Nights,* Helforth cues us to the palimpsestic *effect* of writing and erasure, which would be the action of ice and fire: *every* line of ice would be melted, erased, by fire, and then re-frozen. The novel, then, works as a continual contradiction of inscription and erasure, of overwriting. The image of fire (or heat) and ice is used in Natalia's narrative (Part II of *Nights*) as well. Nat remarks, "even if she wanted to rise up, she dared not, for that destructive memory of heat-lightning. The 'I love Neil' was lightning across ice-floes. Their love was too intensely cerebral" (40). The ("destructive") syntax and grammar of "I love Neil" is differential: The subject "I" and object "Neil" are permanently separated from each other. They are incommensurable in that syntactical construction. Even though "[t]heir love was too cerebral," the syntactical construction of "I love Neil" *embodies* "I" and "Neil," writing individual bodies through the linguistic skin which is invoked in this construction. Syntax creates an imaginary, corporeal limit between "I" and "Neil." Like "lightening across ice-floes," syntax – the subject/object split – separates what was once one. The effect of "I love Neil" is anti-palimpsestic. Instead of sharing skin, or corporeal surface, "I" and "Neil" each become contained within their own skin – they become distinct, and thus the "memory" of heat-lightning (syntax) is "destructive". The syntax, like lightning, breaks a shared skin into discrete fleshy surfaces. The image of lightning on/across ice, rather than being an image of erasure and re-inscription upon a single surface, like Helforth's remark that every line seemed to bleed "ice and fire," is an image which separates surface. As such, H.D. exposes how conventional syntax reinforces the notion of the individual in language by

keeping separate the subject and the object; conventional syntax implies individual skins, and thus the individual (body) of liberal ideology.

H.D. takes up the issue of skin in language several times in the narrative. When Nat considers if she should have a baby with Neil, her sister-in-law Renne reminds her, "I've told you a thousand times, that would spoil everything. If you have his child then *you* are woman, *he* is man, that's smashed" (21). The typography of this sentence is interesting: *you* and *he* are italicized, emphasizing the separation not so much between woman and man, but between distinct pronouns, between the bodies to which they refer (whether directly or indirectly). Later, typographic convention again emphasizes separation, when Nat explains, "David will break between *us* and make *him-me*, a fissure or a chasm" (72). Again it is the pronouns that are italicized: *us* and *him-me.* The hyphen marks the separation, or more accurately, the hyphen exemplifies the relationship of skin between Neil and Nat at the end of the narrative: the hyphen between "him" and "me" creates a kind of "semi-detached" (104) form of "us," and as such, with two words instead of one, insists upon the separateness of each, insists upon individual skins.

The notion of "spoiling" is used twice in the narrative when describing separation. Nat notes that David will "spoil everything if he insists on names, this fissure of personality. He will ruin the thing she is, the thing she lets herself be" (40), and Renne insists that if Natalia were to have Neil's child, thus bringing their relationship down to distinct (sexed) bodies, it "would spoil everything" (21). It strikes me that this idea of "spoiling" has to do with a willingness to

suspend the conventions of the individual, of separateness. When/if Nat, Neil, and Renne participate in normative relations of language and bodies then the *effect* of palimpsest is spoiled. Because separation, the ideology of the individual, and the incest taboo are so pervasive in (the English) language, palimpsestic writing requires a relinquishing of norms. When these norms enter into the palimpsestic narrative they threaten the shared surface; they spoil this shared *textual corpus*, this collective skin.

The palimpsestic narrative works against separation by exposing the linguistic conventions of discrete skins, of individuals and their surfaces. As I have shown, this exposure reveals the normative work that proper names and pronouns do. By linguistic convention, names and pronouns demarcate where one body starts and another ends. H.D. draws attention to what names normally mean and implies that, *this is not the work that this text is doing*. Instead, H.D.'s palimpsestic names operate against the norm, and as linguistic epidermis, they become porous, become ambiguously referential. Names and pronouns in *Nights* perform a moving back and forth between positions which have no distinct beginning or end.

Of course there are other linguistic conventions that serve to separate bodies, to invoke skin, and to differentiate individuals. In particular, I was struck by the front cover of the New Directions edition of *Nights* for its apparent resolve to keep separate the living author (H.D.) and her nom de plume (John Helforth). The cover looks like this:

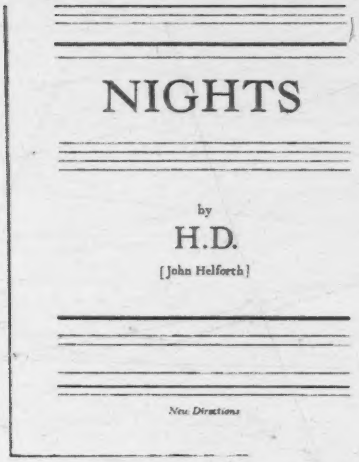


Fig. 1. *Nights.* 2nd ed. published by New Directions (1986).

What I am interested in here is the square parentheses around "John Helforth". While, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, John Helforth, Nat Saunderson, and H.D. all refer back to the same body/mind, they represent a multiple identity, a tripling of identity, so that the/an individual is difficult to ascertain. John Helforth, H.D., and Natalia Saunderson are each manifest within/upon a palimpsestic subjectivity. The square parentheses seems to belie an anxiety (of the publisher? printer? cover designer?) about this multiple, or multiplied self. The typographic detailing of the parentheses forces the reader to simultaneously *differentiate between* H.D. and John Helforth, and to recognize that they are the *same*: that they are one, or rather, that H.D. is one and that John Helforth does not exist. John Helforth as "unreal" is surrounded, and thus kept separate, by the parentheses. As a linguistic convention, then, the parentheses surround in order to create distinction *between* – they operate as skin to mark a limit between, in this case, what is real and what is imaginary – *between* the

"real" author" and her "imaginary self". So while the notation of both H.D. and John Helforth on the book's cover indicates a certain willingness on the part of the publisher to play with H.D.'s palimpsestic identities, the parentheses mark the uneasiness with this multiplying of self: they insist that there is a single H.D. distinct from John Helforth. This distinction, as I have argued, is contrary to H.D.'s notion of palimpsest. John Helforth and H.D. co-exist within/upon a collective skin that contains both their names and also Nat's, thus there is no way to differentiate where he begins and she ends as they are the same: one and multiple. To print "[John Helforth]" is to print him his own skin, which is misleading as he shares skin with Nat (and thus Neil, Renne) and H.D. The parentheses on the book's cover, then, work against the palimpsest of the text, marking absolute difference where none is indicated. However, these parentheses also do the work of exposing the conventions of skin in written language, making the work of palimpsest more apparent, making visible the bodily surface, the epidermis as corporeal limit in written language.

The first edition "of 100 copies" of *Nights*, which was "printed by friends of the author for private circulation" (Helforth, title page), shows none of the same attempt to bracket John Helforth. Instead, the name "H.D." appears nowhere on the cover, nor indeed in the text.

NIGHTS

BY

JOHN HELFORTH

Fig. 2. *Nights* 1st ed. printed by Imprimerie Darantiere (1935)

There are many possible explanations for this idiosyncrasy in the publishing history of *Nights.* One, of course, is that the privately-printed First Edition was circulated among the initiated, among people who would know that H.D. was John Helforth, and as such, there was no need to "authorize" the text by printing her name on its cover. Another possibility, is that the New Directions edition which was published in the mid-1980's – a period of renewed interested in H.D.[8] – counted on the piqued scholarly interest in H.D.'s work and on the demand for the recovery of the texts of forgotten women authors.[9] So while there are unquestionably paratextual reasons for the parentheses around "John Helforth" on the New Directions cover (and lack thereof on the cover of the First Edition), the linguistic convention of the parentheses is still certainly worth considering.

The Separate Skin of Personhood

She loved him but loved him in
another dimension, out of the body.

-- H.D. *Bid Me To Live (A Madrigal)*

I want to get back now to my original passage, where Natalia gets out of her body. This passage is preceded by several invocations of "sexlessness," and it occurs to me that, as Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and others have noted, "persons cannot be signified within language without the mark of gender" (Butler *Gender* 21). Without gender, a person cannot be recognized in language. So, as I write that H.D.'s palimpsestic autobiography is about the sharing of skin, which means a departure from the ideology of the individual, it is not surprising that Natalia would consider getting out of her (sexed) body because she "didn't want to be a person" (*Nights* 103). It makes sense, then, if Nat is trying to escape "personhood," that she would first attempt becoming "sexless," or try experiencing sexlessness and then "want" to "get out of [her] body" (64, 66) altogether. Furthermore, Neil's corporeal certainty is also called into question when Nat asks, "Had Neil a body?" (38). In order to merge identities, skin, persons, the definiteness of separate skins, of conventional bodies, must be put into crisis, must be questioned. It is necessary to depart from liberal notions of the person, of the autonomous individual, in order to accept a palimpsestic subjectivity that is imagined through a sharing of skin. If a "body" is what formalizes being a "person," if, as Robert Smith argues, a body is what allows the

subject to represent one's self to one's self and to others (63), then getting out of the body, as a marker of the individual, is necessary.

Miranda Hickman has noted that the "erotic force of *Nights* [. . .] is indeed impersonal, beyond gender, individuals, names" (Hickman 343).[10] I would argue that it is not only the *erotic force* which is "impersonal, beyond gender, individuals, names" but bodies, skin itself: this is perhaps why H.D./Natalia writes, "flesh must be scraped off" (56) and "personality was the thing that didn't matter" (72). To lose flesh and personality is to lose those things that make us distinct, autonomous, and thus, to turn to the word used by Hickman, *Nights* might be understood not only to be *im*personal but also *extra*personal. A terrifying prospect, which is perhaps why Nat says, "she almost went too far"; leaving behind the liberal ideology of the individual body/person would be going "too far".[11] It is as if, by worrying about whether or not she went "too far," Nat is momentarily concerned with her lack of fitting into the dominant mode of representation. Written as a palimpsestic body, Nat's skin is a shared surface. It is simultaneously one and many, and thus in the system of the language that reinforces and recognizes the individual, Nat risks becoming unrecognizable, invisible, and thus perhaps has gone too far. To escape a separate body and merge into a collective skin is to deny oneself a pleasure, as de Certeau says, "that of being recognized . . . of becoming an identifiable and legible word in a social language . . of being inscribed in a symbolic order" (140).

As Kristeva notes in *Powers of Horror*, the "border has become an object" (4). That is, the skin, as border, boundary, threshold, has become the object of

distinction, it exists separate from, and yet constitutes the subject, the body/person, or as she puts it rhetorically, "How can I be without border?" (*Powers* 4). To go without, to negate the border, to change the nature, the function of skin, is to breach the threshold of individuality and enter into the realm of palimpsestic subjectivity where one is many and many are one. In palimpsestic autobiography, skin is no longer written as a limit; in the writing of shared surface, through palimpsestic narrative, the porousness of skin becomes apparent. Individual consciousness no longer holds the dominant weight of importance; names no longer signify autonomous beings. In conventional narrative structure, where the archive of language is observed systematically, wherein liberal humanist ideology is implied, reflected, reproduced, syntax is standardized, rules of grammar observed, subjects are kept discrete from objects, and selves are kept discrete from others. By disrupting syntax, by confusing subject and object, and by multiplying and morphing names, H.D. challenges the conventions of the Individual in language.

All of this has led me to wonder about our investment in this corporeal surface. In their Introduction to *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, Avril Horner and Angela Keane note that the Foucauldian premise understands "the body as socially inscribed *surface*" (2 emphasis mine). Judith Butler writes about matter "not as a site or a surface, but as a *process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (*Bodies* 9). I wonder about this idea of surface. Does our investment in skin, in surface, in skin and surface as the markers of difference

and distinction, have to do with our investment in the ideology of the Individual? Of keeping ourselves separate? And if so, is the palimpsestic body, the shared skin, rather than being an inert construction of a new modernist discourse, instead an active and imaginative site of resistance to liberal ideology?

It strikes me that by getting out of the conventional body and into a palimpsestic textual and imaginary body, H.D. forces a certain detachment from the ideology of the individual, from discrete selves, and allows us to entertain the possibility of porous identity, where skin is shared, where it becomes impossible to determine where one body, one identity ends and another begins. Furthermore, her palimpsestic autobiographies, by blending identities, merging, sharing skin, dismantle those binaries laterally associated with the self/other split: man/woman, mind/body, etc. etc. As a reading practice, the ability to recognize and entertain the porousness inherent to a palimpsestic autobiography allows us to perhaps put into practice, even on the level of thought experiment, a new practice of shared rather than separate skin.

Notes

[1] Of course de Certeau is in good company. Many theorists have taken up the idea of the body in/through discourse and/or the discursive body. See Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume I* and his *Discipline and Punish;* For a second-wave feminist take on bodies and discourse see Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One;* Nancy Hartsock's "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing a Grounding For a Specifically Historical Materialism," Rosemary Hennessy's *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, and N. Katherine Hayle's *How We Became Posthuman* provide a range of post-Foucault feminist criticism on the body and discourse debates; and, on how bodies have been constructed through the discourse of medical science see Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex*, and Londa Schiebinger's *The Mind has No Sex?*.

[2] In *Powers of Horror*: *An Essay on Abjection* Julia Kristeva writes skin as that corporeal surface which signals either purity or contamination. When the skin, as visible surface, as limit, shows signs of contamination, of filth, (when it leaks pus, blood), when it no longer operates as "the cover that guarantees corporeal integrity" (Kristeva 101) it signals abjection. See, in particular, Kristeva's discussion on leprosy in the section "Boundaries of the Self's Clean and Proper Body" (101).

[3] My approach in this paper is what Jodi O'Brien in "Changing the Subject" has identified as a materialist-constructionist approach. That is, I am arguing that "whether someone is present or not, we conjure up and make sense of ourselves and others in terms of embodiment" (57). Furthermore, following

writers like O'Brien (who in turn follows Judith Butler and Sandy Stone), I assume that "bodies, selves . . . cultures [and languages] are mutually constitutive" (57).

[4] As Derrida notes in *Positions*, "'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western Metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system" (19). The metaphysics of skin, then, or the metaphysics of a physical, separate body is implied in English – a language that is steeped in the ideology of the individual. The ideology of the individual is characterized by the gradual isolation of the "individual body" (de Certeau 142). As de Certeau argues, it is the result of "[a] long historical development stretching from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century" wherein the basic unit of society "gradually ceases to be the body politic in order to become the individual body" (142). In this light, we can understand that language(s), and textual knowledges/bodies in general, reflect that, within the doctrine of liberalism, "bodies have become more autonomous with respect to the cosmos" (143) and thus the individual body is manifestly present (or is perceived to be so) in what de Certeau calls the *textual corpus* and which can also be understood as the "everyday language" to which Derrida refers. A text like *Nights*, which focuses so heavily on the protagonist's body (Hickman 13), must also be understood to be implicitly drawing attention to the textual body, to the language/discourse which writes that body, and to how the body is coded into the language.

[5]. The trope of the physical wound occurring on the skin – "across a wounded surface" – after a physical/psychic separation between bodies which were once one body is a familiar one in H.D. As I discussed in Chapter One, in *Asphodel*, H.D. writes the separation of Her Gart and Fayne Rabb as being accompanied by a wound of the flesh as well: the "wound that she had not repudiated" (77). It should be noted here that one might consider this trope to be a fairly conventional (if hyperbolic) way of discussing a break-up between lovers. We are used to hearing people say that two lovers are "joined at the hip" for example, and co-extensive to this, that when *one* person leaves, the *other* person feels as if "a part of themselves is missing" or that they have been "torn apart". H.D. consistently draws upon language conventions (or conventional language) of love and sexual desire to describe the relationship between (her) self and (her) lovers. In her excessive and seemingly deliberate use of these clichés H.D. defamiliarizes these tropes and forces the reader to take them seriously. So, for example, a flesh wound upon separation is of course metaphorical, but as the lovers have been so thoroughly merged in the palimpsest, there is a certain degree of readerly anxiety that accompanies this separation. It is as if the separation compromises the integrity of the shared surface, and thus of the text itself. The reader thus comes to rely upon the shared status of skin and when it is no longer shared, the wound becomes less metaphorical; it is instead experienced as a rupture in the text.

[6] Following the work of Luce Irigaray, S. Travis draws connections between ice and mirrors, which are, as she points out. "both *la glace* in French"

thus illustrating what she calls the "semantic connection between *la glace* of ice and *la glace* of the mirror" (124). I will take up Travis' reading, drawing parallels between corporeal surfaces written in *Nights* as ice and as glass.

[7] Kristeva discusses incest in language in the context of her theories of the "semiotic" and "symbolic," and following the Lacanian notion of language as the Law of the Father. The Mother is always "the other" in language in Kristevan and Lacanian terms, and thus to approach "the other" is to approach "the first other, the mother" (*Desire* 191) and this approach breeches the incest taboo which is built into the separating function the "othering" function of language.

[8] In 1986, for example, both the *Iowa Review* and *Contemporary Literature* published an H.D. "Centennial Issue," and in 1987 *Agenda* published their "H.D. Special Issue." Furthermore, the mid-1980's was time of great biographical and critical interest in H.D. See, for example, Janice Robinson's *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (1982), Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and her World* (1985), Rachel Blau Duplessis' *H.D.: The Career of That Struggle* (1986), and Michael King's anthology of writing about H.D., *H.D.: Woman and Poet* (1986).

[9] For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Norton Anthology Literature by Women: The Traditions in English* was first published in 1985.

[10] Hickman is following an argument put forth by Dianne Chisholm in "Pornopoeia, the Modernist Canon, and the Cultural Capital of Sexual Literacy: The Case of H.D." While Chisholm writes about a selection of H.D.'s poems, I agree with Hickman, that "[h]er account pertains to *Nights* in many ways" (342).

In particular, Chisholm's assertion that "H.D.'s pornopoeia advocates . . . neither a body politic nor even a body" (90) reveals that H.D.'s poetry and her autobiographical fiction can certainly be understood to deal with similar themes.

[11] I am indebted here to Shari Benstock who notes that palimpsestic writing, by obscuring certainties of past and present, self and other, etc., by functioning to "disintegrat[e] . . . the imaginary unity that constitutes the *moi*, [is] a terrifying enterprise for the subject, who rightly fears that disintegration of the ego means psychic death" (*Textualizing* 6).

Chapter Three

Palimpsest and Mis-Repetition: The Effect of Shared Skin in *Palimpsest*

> In London one let go, something happened,
> as season merged with season, and friend with
> friend and day and night in one delicious over-
> blur of autumn mist (though it was getting now
> just a little too cold) so thought merged with
> sensation, idea with image and right subtly
> and indissolubly with wrong.
>
> -- H.D. "Murex" *Palimpsest* (96).

> I was doing what the cinema was doing,
> I was making a continuous succession
> of the statement of what that person was
> until I had not many things but one.
>
> -- Gertrude Stein "Portraits and Repetition" (106).

Preface

In his Introduction to H.D.'s *Asphodel*, Robert Spoo notes that the novel is "quirky and nebulous . . . repetitious and recursive" (ix). Indeed, this statement can be made for all, or at least many, of H.D.'s autobiographical novels. The repetitious syntax, plot, characterizations, and phraseology are features any reader of her romans à clef will notice. In fact, my own research notes include a frustrated "*What's with this repetition? Is there a reason for it?*" in the margins of *HER*. It has been my experience that when something irks me about a piece of literature, it generally means that I should try to get to the bottom of it and write it out. That is what I am doing here and I think that I have found an answer to my own question. Yes, there *is* a reason for it.

In order to illustrate what I consider to be the "reason for repetition" I have elected to read H.D.'s novel *Palimpsest* in rather intimate relation with Gertrude Stein's "Portraits and Repetition". Stein provides a theory of repetition which certainly makes sense when reading H.D.'s prose. In fact, as I will explain directly, repetition *creates* the palimpsestic effect of *Palimpsest.*

The Reason for Repetition

H.D.'s *Palimpsest* (1926) is a roman à clef in three parts: "Hipparchia: War Rome," (*circa* 75 B.C); "Murex: War and Postwar London," (*circa* A.D. 1916-1926); and, "Secret's Name: Excavator's Egypt" (*circa* A.D. 1925).[1] The stories exhibit repeated syntactical constructions, similar language, phrases, colours, affects; each narrative seems to repeat, to recollect, to recall, to resemble the other(s). The effect of repetition is superimposition.[2] Each story is repeatedly written on top of itself and on top of the other stories, giving the palimpsestic effect – which I have described in the preceding two chapters – of merging bodies, space, time. The act of repetition re-inscribes new context onto something (i.e., a word, situation, phrase, colour, texture, etc.) that is the same, that is repeated, thus making it different. In order to illustrate the palimpsestic effects of repetition, my discussion of *Palimpsest* will focus on a theory of repetition, or the theory that "there is no such thing as repetition" (Stein 100), which was developed and practiced by another modernist woman writer, Gertrude Stein.[3] Stein's theory of repetition, as articulated in "Portraits and Repetition," allows me to explain

how I have come to understand H.D.'s repetitive style as a form of cinematic projection onto a shared surface, and how, what I will call palimpsestic mis-repetition gives the effect of shared skin.[4]

Stein argues,

> if you like, repetition, that is if you like the repeating that is the same thing, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing *there can be no repetition* because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis. (100 emphasis mine)[5]

Thus, emphasis – that which changes, and makes new – makes it impossible to have repetition, since a repetition is always different than that which it might be thought to repeat. Repetition cannot exist in itself since, in the act of repetition one must draw on, or to use Stein's word, "notice" (105) a resemblance to something that seems to have gone before.[6] In the act of noticing, then, one must *remember*; and in the act of *remembering* there is inherently a *noticing* the concomitant difference and sameness between that which is being repeated (the *repeated*) and that element (word, refrain, colour, etc.) which is thought to be doing the repeating (the *repeater*).[7] The act of repetition, or of recognizing a repetition or resemblance, must always be an act of mis-remembering, of mis-recognition, thus giving us what I will call *mis-repetition*, since the two are not

the same and therefore not repeated. Repetition, then, is a relation of difference (*a noticing different instances*) and of sameness (*of things which appear to resemble each other*), and therefore always involves a double noticing, or as Stein says, "there are two things" (105).

In attempting to get beyond remembering, beyond the effects of (what is not) repetition in her portraits, Stein writes that she began "doing what the cinema was doing": "I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one" (106). [8] The cinema creates this effect "[b]y a continuously moving picture of any one there is no memory of any other thing" (105); it is an effect of continual presencing which occurs because "[i]n a cinema picture no two pictures are exactly alike each one is *just that much different* from the one before" (106 emphasis mine). In her portraits, Stein does "what the cinema was doing" through repetition: "She is not changing. She is knowing nothing of not changing. She is not needing to be changing" ("Four" 111). When I read "She is knowing nothing of not changing" I must read backwards and forwards on top of "She is not changing" and "She is not needing to be changing" in order to determine if the sentences are *exactly the same*. Because the sentences are "just that much different," when they are superimposed on each other in the process of reading backwards and forwards, they are all continuously present. Each is discernable from the others, and yet they exist in relation to each other, leaving the reader with the image of that relation: with "not many things but one". This cinematic effect of mis-repetition, of repetition which

is "just that much different," becomes interestingly palimpsestic when considered in conjunction with the technical elements of filmmaking.

Mis-Repetition and Making Obvious "what the cinema was doing"

In "The Principles of Film Form" published in 1931 in *CLOSE UP*, the journal of film criticism edited and published by Kenneth Macpherson and Bryher,[9] S.M. Eisenstein provides an illuminating glimpse into cinema technique:

> We know that the phenomenon of movement in the Film resides in the fact that two motionless images of a moving body following one another in juxtaposition "flow" into each other—in one movement—after being shown in a small enough time distance. [. . .]
>
> Let us examine more exactly the course of phenomenon we are discussing, how it really occurs, and draw conclusion from it.
>
> Two shot immobilities [sic] *next* to each other result in the arising of a concept of movement.
>
> Is this accurate? Pictorially-phraseologically [sic] yes.
>
> But mechanically the process is otherwise.
>
> For, in fact, each sequential element is perceived not *next to* the other, but *on top of* the other.
>
> For:

> The movement-percept (or feeling) arises in the process of the *super-position* upon the *received* impression of the first position of an object—of the *becoming-visible* new position of the object. (174)

While the time of composition of *Palimpsest* (1923-25) (Freidman *Penelope* 237) pre-dates the *CLOSE UP* era of H.D.'s life, I think that it is important to note the significant overlap in techniques between her palimpsestic autobiography, and what was then considered avant-garde cinema theory. In particular, if we accept Stein's assertion that her particular brand of mis-repetition is a cinematic style, then, following Eisenstein's explication of cinematic flow, or motion, we can understand a certain kind of *writing* to operate as visible, or obvious, *superposition*.[10] Stein's (and I would argue H.D.'s) mis-repetition *makes apparent* the visual impression or perception created by cinematic repetition, or, what Perdita Shaffner calls in her Introduction to H.D.'s *Nights*, a "trompe l'oeil" (x). Each mis-repetition in Stein's portrait, for example, provides "a difference just a difference enough so that it could go on and be a present something" (Stein 106); that is, each element is simultaneously "present" (visible) on a shared, layered surface. The flickering and movement created by linguistic mis-repetition forces us to acknowledge the mis-remembering, the going back and forth and superpositioning (to use Eisenstein's term) of each mis-repetition (which is of course a bit different) on top of each other. Unlike in cinema – wherein we suspend disbelief in the effect of mis-repetition in order to perceive movement –

linguistic, palimpsestic mis-repetition, as practiced by Stein and H.D., forces the reader to notice the effect. And it is when we notice the superpositioning effect of palimpsestic mis-repetition that we must reckon with the notion of shared surface, of shared skin.

And how does this become shared skin? As I will demonstrate through a close reading of *Palimpsest*, the effect of palimpsestic superpositioning makes it obvious that it is impossible to distinguish between individual layers/elements of text since the element of the repetition which is the same, in the act of layered/palimpsestic reading, eclipses the other, and the element that is different becomes present (visible) on top of and through the other elements of difference. The effect of palimpsestic repetition, then, is a shared surface, a shared skin: it places many layers into one shared surface, which, in effect, forces bodies to share skin.

"Just that much different": *Mis*-repetition in *Palimpsest*

To read the text is somehow to view it.

-- Deborah Kelly Kloepfer
"Fishing the Murex Up" (555).

Mis-repetition comes in many forms in *Palimpsest.*[11] In my close reading I will discuss linguistic and narrative mis-repetition in *Palimpsest* in order to illustrate how H.D.'s repetitious prose style creates a Steinian effect of continuous present – of "not many things but one" (Stein 107). Linguistic mis-repetition

operates in the text through, as Deborah Kelly Kloepfer has observed, "a series of embedded refrains" (562). These refrains are "lines that . . . reappear over and over" (Kloepfer 562). As Kloepfer notes, "eventually . . . whole sections . . . are formulated entirely of reconstituted refrains, until the present of the text is simultaneously its past" (562). Chapter I of *Palimpsest's* "Hipparchia" is noticeably marked by repetition. The novel opens with Hipparchia's Roman lover Marius looking around a room for Hipparchia: "Half expectant, entirely oblivious of her own wishes in this or any matter, it was borne upon him for almost the first time in their *some half year's intimacy*, how great, how overmastering was this peculiar longing" (3 emphasis mine). And soon after, "He saw now the room almost for the first time in *some six month's intimacy*" (4 emphasis mine), and quickly on the heels of that sentence, the refrain of time is repeated: "So gently that only Marius, after *some six month's intimacy*, could dream that she was pressing with exquisite Medea-insouciance a hard blade of ironic and decrying steel within his entrails" (5 emphasis mine). The refrain of "some half years'/six month's intimacy" beckons the reader to "notice" the repetition and to compare each instance of the refrain. In so doing, the refrain and the text surrounding each instance of the refrain become *superpositioned* on top of each other, the difference of each instance being "just that much different" from the others so that the back and forth movement is visible, is recorded *on top of* the others, the difference being that which is visible. It thus becomes *the relation* between the repetitions that creates the final image. Once the mis-repetition is noticed we

cannot forget the resemblance; we are not able to "remember" each instance, or element, as separate from each other. Rather, we can now only experience *the relation* between the instances, and the image created by *the relation* is what turns the separate elements (many) into one. Each instance/element becomes part of one relation thus creating the effect of palimpsestic shared surface, a layering of mis-repetitions.

The word "peculiar" works as refrain in this first section as well. "Peculiar" occurs four times in this 3 ½-page spread: in the beginning, twice in the middle, and at the very end of the section. It thus creates the effect that "the present of the text is simultaneously its past" (Kloepfer 562):

Layer 1

> "Half expectant, entirely oblivious of her own wishes in this or any matter, it was borne upon him for almost the first time in their some half year's intimacy, how great, how overmastering was this peculiar longing." (3)

Layer 2

> "Almost for the first time he saw the room a thing apart, cold, smooth, a flower, something on its own, with a peculiar and imbuing fragrance." (4)

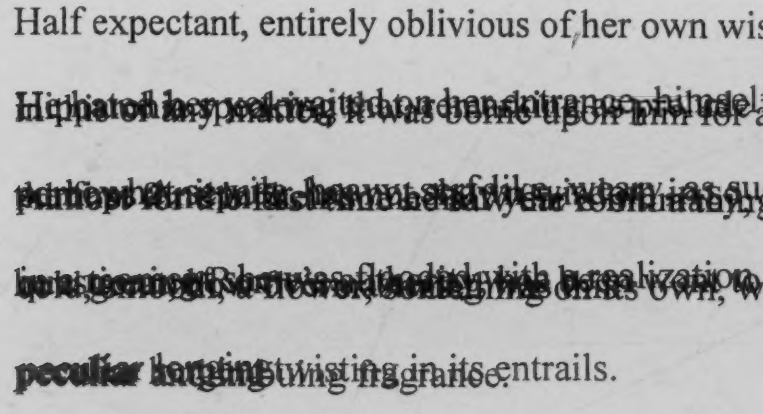
Layer 3

"Hipparchia speaking that, remarking as prelude that perhaps Anitpater has not shown wisdom in so questioning Rome's authority, has been wont to strike a peculiar serpent twisting in its entrails." (5)

Layer 4

"He hated her yet waited on her entrance, himself somewhat servile, heavy, serf-like, weary, as suddenly in a moment he was flooded with a realization of his peculiar longing." (6)

Of course each instance of "peculiar" is different, it exists in a new context, it is referring to something different. The repetition of "peculiar" superpositions each instance onto the others creating a palimpsestic shared surface:


Half expectant, entirely oblivious of her own wishes
peculiar
peculiar
peculiar

them one. Linguistic mis-repetition layers each on top of the other, each story bleeding through the other layers, making it impossible to isolate the stories from each other. For example, in "Hipparchia," Hipparchia observes, "Her body recalled her to herself." (38); in "Murex," "Raymonde steeled herself to Raymonde" (123); and in "Secret Name," Helen notes, "her everyday self [. . .] was held static by this other pair of selves" (176).[12] The merging of subject and object, and the concomitant splitting of subjectivities between her*selves* recalls each of these passages to the others, forming a layered alliance between Hipparchia, Raymonde, and Helen. These three women stand in for H.D. and therefore are already many and one and, separated by time and space, they merge into each other through the palimpsestic effect of narrative and linguistic mis-repetition.

The tension between past and present operates as a governing and repeated theme in *Palimpsest*. As Kloepfer notes, "Hipparchia is haunted by her own past and by ancient texts; Raymonde Ransome is consumed by the split between her present and her past and by some ancient past that informs her own; Helen Fairwood searches for herself in an ancient mystery that she invokes to clarify both modernity and herself" (558). Kloepfer notes variously how the three protagonists repeat and are thus joined to each other. She observes that the narrative similarities and mis-repetitions (that's my term of course) of images surrounding the three protagonists "form the *connective tissue* of the text" (Kloepfer 558 emphasis mine). Furthermore, she notes, "Hipparchia, Raymonde

Ransome, and Helen Fairwood [. . .] are also *linked* by being writers" (559 emphasis mine). Although Kloepfer uses the biological metaphor of "connective tissue," her article does not address the implications that H.D.'s palimpsestic writing might have on our perception of bodies, of skin. While Kloepfer is interested in how this "connective tissue" operates to create what she calls H.D.'s "layered consciousness" (572), I am interested in understanding what impact this "layered consciousness" has on the ontological status of *skin*.

Like the merged bodies of Hipparchia, Raymonde, and Helen, the past and the present merge together, the distinction between them becoming obscure: "The so far past that it was the eternal present" (*Palimpsest* "Murex" 133). The past becomes the present through narrative mis-repetition. In "Murex," Ermy's story of how Mavis "had 'taken'" her lover Martin is a mis-repetition of Raymonde's past, wherein Mavis "had 'taken' [Raymonde's lover] Freddie" (138). As Raymonde reflects upon Ermy's story, she realizes that "now, if she thought of Mavis, [she] [. . .] saw no longer Freddie but this other, this new accredited lover" (138). The mis-repetition is figured as almost a projected image, an image illuminated and flickering: "In the light of Freddie wearing tousled hair like a conqueror's helmet, she saw this other. Martin. Martin. [. . .] Martin. There was a Martin. [. . .] There was a Martin and against Martin another had moved, another presence that so far had stood between her and Freddie. [. . .] Yet it had brought her Freddie" (138-9). Martin and Freddie, although separated by time, exist in a continuous, "eternal" present/presence. The story of Martin and Mavis mis-

repeats the story of Freddie and Mavis, their two skins, Martin's and Freddie's, merging, "like so many superimposed people" (*Palimpsest* 159), like the past and present, into one layered surface, one skin.

Helen Fairwood, the H.D. figure in "Secret Name," shares skin, through narrative mis-repetition, with her doppelgänger, Mary Wharton. What is interesting about the following passage, is that the mis-repetition infers cinematic projection, with images of light and layering preceding the figurative layering of Helen and Mary:

> A fish sunk deep into layer on layer of sea, layer on layer of fresh lake water, with memory of glint and speck and fleck and streak of daylight gold. Deep in some dark layer and layer of inwash and overwash and interplay of current, leaving one released, free, inundated thus and *indisseverable*. To-day at noon (now it must be) the sun at its tropic intensity (beating through the rough linen and thinnish layers of shantung beneath) brought out a secondary layer of inter-related potentialities. For weren't she and Mary in their outlook singularly, even as the captain had last night on the home trip insinuated, alike? The same gaunt frames, thin with that underlayer of reserve power, of strength, that frequently brings certain types of thin-boned women more than their share of unsolicited sympathy. [. . .] Thin and virile, the two were temperamentally matched and physically. The sun smote on her

> and on young Mary [. . .] alike, indifferently. (230-1 emphasis mine)

H.D.'s repeated use of "layer," at the beginning of this passage works to motivate a very deliberate reading style – based on mis-repetition – a palimpsestic/cinematic reading wherein light projects layered images, superpositioning body on top of body, making each layer "*indisseverable*" from the others. Helen and "young Mary" are thus layered, are thus written onto/as the same surface and share skin. Their differently-aged, yet similarly "gaunt" bodies are overlapping layers on the palimpsest of the narrative; the difference of their ages again marks their visible difference, marks the *mis*-repetition and initiates, once again, the merging of past and present in *Palimpsest*. Written as shared skin, as continuously present, on top of, superpositioned, similar and "just that much different," the bodies of Helen and Mary mark another instance wherein "[t]he past was the future" (*Palimpsest* 167).

Through narrative mis-repetition, bodies, selves, and skin palimpsestically merge across the stories as well within them. In "Secret Name" Helen notes that her "laughter merged and made one all the selves, the self of the slave locked into the silver barred and shimmering intellect, the slave more languorous, yet still locked into the pleasure terraces of some Asiatic or Egyptian city, the other, the slave that held, a solid link, her everyday self, enslaved to both these others" (212). The mis-repeating of the "self" and/as the "slave" writes Helen on top of Hipparchia, a Greek concubine/slave in the Roman Empire. The selves merge.

Through narrative and linguistic mis-repetition the many layers of the self, the many skins (H.D, Hipparchia, Raymonde Ransome, Helen Fairwood), are superpositioned, are rendered one self, one skin, the result of many bodies being projected/written onto/as a single surface.

To close, I want to discuss the stilling, or freezing – the separation and "succession" (Stein 119) that creates layers – which exposes the process of palimpsestic/cinematographic writing and reading:

> No, there she drew the line, just there. There *was* a line for all the subtlety of London and over-layers of London on London. [. . .] Mavis upon Mavis, Ermy upon Ermy upon Ermy. Raymonde upon countless tenuous Raymondes. But there *was* a line. There was evidently and obviously a line. She had reached it. (*Palimpsest* 136)

This "line" marks the "stilling," the rendering separate, of multiplicities. The line marks the process of isolating these layers through mis-repetition in order to expose the layered quality of the final, palimpsestic image. The line marks the difference between layers in order to reveal the layers themselves, in order to expose the palimpsestic effect of merging selves, of merging skins. The effect of palimpsestic writing creates a layered image through flickering mis-repetition and simultaneously exposes the workings of the mis-repetition, revealing the layers. We can only have a sense of merging, if we first have a sense of separate elements. *Palimpsest* forces the reader to perceive the difference in each mis-

repetition, disallows any sense of initial narrative unity. It is through mis-repetition that a sense of unity, of similarities merging with differences, of many becoming one, that we can understand the sharing of surface, of skin:

> Face upon face, impression upon impression and all of modernity (as she viewed it) was as the jellified[13] and sickly substance of a collection of colourless photographic negatives through which gleamed the reality. (158)

It is the mis-repetition which separates and merges the layers; the "face upon face" gives us two faces, the "upon" superpositions them. Palimpsestic mis-repetition, then, by its very construction exposes the working of repetition – the "succession" of elements "being shown in small enough time distance" (Eisenstein 174) – and forces us to acknowledge the merging of many into one. The effect of palimpsest, of shared skin, relies on our understanding of separateness in order to make it remarkable. The effect, then, is radical, for it takes our perceptions of individuality and separateness (which I have discussed in Chapters 1 and 2) exposes them and then merges them. The palimpsestic effect is thus a surfacefuck. It taunts us by separating what we thought was single – "Raymonde upon countless tenuous Raymondes" (136) – and merging what we thought was separate – "season merged with season, and friend with friend and day and night in one delicious over-blur of autumn mist [. . .] so thought merged with sensation, idea with image and right subtly and indissolubly with wrong" (96). And as "friend merges with friend" and we get "friend" there is no way to

separate "friend" from "friend," for they exist now as a simultaneously single and multiple entity, a relation of sameness and difference, a palimpsestic image that is intrinsically each and both at the same time.

Notes

[1] Susan Stanford Friedman classifies *Palimpsest* as an "historical novel" (235), but I would argue that the characters are fairly identifiable (indeed Friedman identifies them) and thus can also be considered to be *à clef*. Friedman notes that *Palimpsest,* like several of H.D.'s "historical novels" (*Pilates Wife, Heylus*) "were written for public consumption" (233) unlike her more explicitly autobiographical romans à clef, *Nights, Asphodel,* and *Paint It To-Day*, which were circulated only among friends and acquaintances.

[2] Friedman observes, "[s]uperimposed on each other, the three tell the story of an exiled woman whose psyche is split by sexual politics at a time of vast societal disruption" (240).

[3] Others have written extensively on repetition. In particular, I have found J. Hillis Miller's "Two forms of Repetitions" in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* to be remarkably helpful. Miller's work follows Gilles Deleuze's *Logique du sens* and is centred on what Deleuze identifies as the two forms of repetition, one "grounded, logical" (Miller 9) and the other "ungrounded" and "baseless" (9). The first manifests repetition as copy and has its basis in the Platonic model of forms: "it establishes the world as icon" (Deleuze, qtd. in Miller 6) and is grounded in a paradigm of archetypes. The copy/original relation is thus "dependent on a third thing, on a principle of identity which precedes [it]" (Miller 9). The second form of repetition "posits a world based on difference" (Miller 6), it "presents the world itself as phantasm" (Deleuze, qtd. in Miller 6).

Instead of Platonic-style copies, this second form of repetition delivers simulacra (Miller 6). Miller further explains repetition as memory by way of Benjamin's Penelope's web theory of Proust. The first form of repetition is "willed memory [that] works logically, by way of similarities which are seen as identities, one thing repeating another and grounded in a concept on the basis of which their likeness may be understood" (Miller 8). The second, ungrounded kind of repetition works by an "involuntary form of memory [. . .] in which one thing is experienced as repeating something which is quite different from it and which it strangely resembles. [. . .] It arises out of the interplay of vaguely similar things" (8). Like palimpsestic erasure and re-inscription, "[e]ach form of repetition calls up the other, by an inevitable compulsion. The second [ungrounded, simulacra] is not the negation or opposite of the first [grounded, copy], but its 'counterpart,' in a strange relation whereby the second is the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out" (Miller 9). It is the second form of repetition which I am interested in here – a repetition that exists within a free play of language, wherein similarities are imagined, believed, read into difference. Insofar as this (second form of) repetition relies on, or "calls up" the first kind (based on the Platonic paradigm of form, of archetypes) I refer back to Stein, who, in insisting upon difference, contends that "there is no such thing as repetition". So I write this chapter on repetition hovering in a middle ground between "there is" and "there isn't". *Palimpsest* is certainly written as what Miller calls a "sequence of repetitions" (13), and yet it is the impossibility of repetition

identified by Stein that makes the novel and its title self-constituting: palimpsest/*Palimpsest* works both through and against repetition.

[4] Here I'd like to acknowledge my supervisor, Dr. Jo-Ann Wallace, for introducing me to "Portraits and Repetition."

[5] In his "Repetition, a Venture in Experimenting Psychology," (1843) Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard wrote, "The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new" (149, III 189). Kierkegaard, like Stein almost a century later, determined, "[t]here is no repetition at all" (169, III 207); and "[t]he only repetition was the impossibility of repetition" (170 III 208).

There is an interesting connection between Stein, Kierkegaard, and H.D. They all took on pseudonyms when writing, and all relied heavily on repetition as a form of self-evaluation and description. As Howard E. Hong and Edna H. Hong note in their introduction to *The Essential Kierkegaard*, Kierkegaard developed a "multiplicity of pseudonymic writers" (ix). As I have noted several times, H.D. also created multiple pseudonyms and persona in her autobiographical fiction. Gertrude Stein famously poses as her lover, Alice B. Toklas, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.* Of course the taking on, or creation of pseudonyms is hardly remarkable, yet as Kierkegaard, H.D., and Stein each use repetition in a similar fashion, I wonder if we can understand their use of pseudonyms to be deliberately palimpsestic. Each authorial pose, voice, and name adds another layer to what I understand to be palimpsestic subjectivity. The fact

that there can be no real repetition, because what is repeated is necessarily new, implicitly works in conjunction with, or affirms, this form of palimpsest. Something new, which seems to be a repetition of something old, but cannot be a repetition because it is new, still relies on the old, on the past, to inform and to exist in relation to the new, the present, and the future. Like palimpsest, then, the layers of naming exist as something separate from, but created by these layers. In the same way that a pseudonym exists in contrast to, and also in alliance with, the legal name of an author, thus creating a new understanding of a person which is multiple and one, so too does repetition create an image which is "clearly another form of the same object" (Miller 10). The palimpsest, like repetition, is neither one nor the other, the first nor the second, but "the relation between" (Miller 9). I would argue that palimpsest, like Benjamin's image [*das Bild*], is, as Miller explains, "the meaning generated by the echoing of two dissimilar things" (Miller 9).

[6] I use the word "seems" here since I do not want to infer that that which appears to be the first instance of an element (which will be repeated) is somehow *a priori,* or has a transcendental relationship to those instances of the element which "seem" to follow it. The first instance then, is not what Derrida calls a "transcendental signified": it does not "exceed the chain of signs" (*Positions* 20), but rather appears first within a particular context.

[7] I use these terms loosely, for the *repeated* and the *repeater* exist in a relationship similar to any transcendental binary (*signifier* and *signified* come to mind – see Note #6). The *repeated* can only be the *repeated* if there is a *repeater*,

thus I mean to use these terms only to indicate the relationship of layering, only to distinguish what is indistinguishable, in order to expose layers that cannot be exposed.

[8] In *Textualizing the Feminine*, Shari Benstock incorporates the notion of Stein's "continuous present" into her discussion of H.D.'s *Helen of Egypt*.

[9] Kenneth Macpherson was H.D.'s bisexual lover and Bryher's husband and Bryher was H.D.'s long time companion and sometimes lover.

[10] The etymological root of the verb "repeat" is "L. *repetere* to attack again, do or say again, fetch back, demand the return of, f. *re-* RE- + *petere* to attack, make for, demand, seek, etc." ("Repeat, v."). To "fetch back" and to "demand the return of" both conjure up tension between the spatial and temporal dimensions. Interestingly, an obscure usage of "repeat" is "To seek in past time; to trace back" ("Repeat, v."). The word "trace," invokes both the notions of time, "To trace its origin or history; to go *back* in time, to date *back,*" and space, "To copy (a drawing, plan, etc.) by following the lines of the original drawing on a transparent sheet placed upon it; to make a tracing of" ("Trace, v.1."). The whole notion of repetition, then, relies on the inseparability of time and space. Furthermore, Friedman adds an illuminating perspective on the issue of space and time in H.D.'s work. She argues that, "[a]dapting an Einsteinian worldview, H.D. regarded space and time as coordinates of consciousness that exist relative to each other" (234). She adds instructively, "Einstein's theory of relativity was generally part of the intellectual crosscurrents of modernism (398 n.28).

[11] Friedman argues that the "superimposition of times and spaces in H.D.'s autobiographical/historical novels contributed to the development of her view of history as repetition rather than linear progression" (235) and that, "[a]s an image for history, [palimpsest] [. . .] signifies the cyclical repetitions that structure the seemingly linear march of time" (237). The use of "repetition" here does not take into consideration Stein's theory that "there is no such thing as repetition". However, because H.D. made sure to always change aspects of her repeated elements, placing refrains, for example, in different contexts, it seems to me that she was implicitly writing for the image created by an overlapping of similar/dissimilar elements.

[12] This particular linguistic repetition creates a palimpsest across novels as well. In *HER*, "Her caught Her to herself" (70), and in *Asphodel,* "Herself had wound about herself blinding herself" (105).

[13] See *Tribute to Freud* and *Notes on Thought and Vision* for detail on H.D.'s "jellyfish experience" (Gelpi, 8).

Conclusion

I Almost Jumped Out Of My (Shared) Skin: Palimpsestic Autobiography as Horror Story

Palimpsestic autobiography rives skin; it bursts through its limits and destabilizes its surface. This is a rather grotesque image. Very ugly bodies come to mind. I have not spoken in the preceding pages of horror, nor of the grotesque, however, as I noted my Introduction, H.D.'s autobiographical fiction is "discomfiting". It is disturbing and disquieting. I have argued in the preceding three chapters that H.D.'s autobiographical prose, through the effect of palimpsest, forces us to read bodies, and thus skin, on top of each other, and that for this reason, her novels make us uncomfortable. This skinfuck give us pause: what does it mean to share skin?

I have spent these three chapters discussing the linguistic trickery by which H.D. produces the effect of palimpsest. In Chapter One I argued that written language, in particular, is structured on the basis of difference and that, what I have called a "linguistic skin" keeps things (words, bodies) separate. In Chapter Two, I asserted that by, writing names and autobiographical bodies palimpsestically, H.D. breaks through the ideology of the Individual. And finally, in Chapter Three I argued that, through the palimpsestic practice of mis-repetition, H.D.'s autobiographical fiction produces the undeniable impulse to read bits of text on top of each other, and thus to superimpose bodies. In each chapter I have argued that what is remarkable about H.D.'s palimpsestic autobiographies is the way that they (individually and collectively) expose

linguistic, narrative, and ideological conventions and make them obvious, thus denaturalizing, defamiliarizing them to us. I think that this process of rendering obvious these conventions can have an impact not only on how we read texts but also how we understand and experience bodies, skin. By denaturalizing separate skin, and by writing autobiographical bodies onto the same surface, H.D. makes us think about our investment in our own separateness. Would we ever say "I am her," like H.D. does in *HER,* for example, and allow "I" and "her" to refer to different bodies? How invested are we in keeping ourselves separate, of keeping the limits between self/other, inside/outside in tact?

It would be possible to read the four novels I have dealt with in this thesis as narratives, as stories. It would be possible to read through the disruptive syntax, the linguistic and narrative mis-repetition, the merging of subjectivities and bodies, and get to the love story that each novel tells. I, however, have read these stories, foremost, by their style. I have argued that by creating the effect of palimpsest H.D. destabilizes our conventions of skin. I have claimed that this thesis is a thought experiment in three chapters. I stand by that claim because I think that H.D.'s novels themselves might be read as thought experiments. The notion of [redacted] skin is a metaphor, but what happens when we extend the metaphor into the realm of material bodies? Is the idea of shared skin a productive way to imagine an unbounded experience of the body? Or is it simply horrifying/grotesque? Is it ridiculous? Are you uncomfortable?

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